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Contesting the Mark of Criminality: Resistance and Ideology in Gangsta Rap, 1988-1997

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Contesting the Mark of Criminality: Resistance and Ideology in Gangsta Rap, 1988-1997

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2009

Dedication

To the heroic families of Texas's death row. They are the inspiration for this project and the heart of a movement.

Acknowledgements

As a materialist, I believe that all texts are conditioned by relationships. Indeed, completing this project would have been impossible were it not for my connection to a wide range of people. I am especially indebted to my talented dissertation committee. Dana Cloud, in addition to being a wise and dedicated advisor, is a dear friend and comrade. Her example and mentorship are constant reminders that scholarship should emerge from the concrete struggles of ordinary people and that while it is important to interpret the world; the point is ultimately to change it. In addition to helping cultivate a supportive and challenging environment as department chair at the University of Texas, Barry Brummett has helped me develop a deeper appreciation for the artistry of criticism and what it means to "get inside" a text. Jennifer Fuller agreed to join this project in spite of having never met me or taught me in class. By challenging me to listen and read broadly as I engaged the vast terrain of hip-hop, she helped make this a more honest and rigorous project. I am eternally grateful to Joshua Gunn for always training his students to become better scholars *and* citizens of the discipline. I am particularly indebted to him for helping me survey a number of psychoanalytic theories necessary for refining my conceptualization of fantasy. Finally, although he and I have never worked at the same institution, Stephen John Hartnett has always taken me seriously as a colleague and consistently demonstrates an investment in my development as a scholar. This project

benefited not only from his expertise in a wide range of literature—particularly regarding the political economy of crime and punishment—but also our shared investment in confronting the prison-industrial complex. As a whole, my talented committee has helped me create a project that is both unmistakably mine but also marked by their considerable influence.

A number of other professors at the University of Texas have guided and challenged me on this journey, making the completion of this project possible. They include Roderick Hart, Richard Cherwitz, Michelle Deitch, Jeffrey Walker, and Harry Cleaver. Susan Corbin, Jennifer Betancourt, Deanna Matthews, and Margaret Surratt have, on a number of occasions, "saved my life" as I encountered various administrative hurdles during my time at UT. They are a staff like none other. Martin "Randy" Cox and the rest of the UT Individual Events Team also helped make my time here meaningful and inspired countless ideas that helped inform this project. Many professors from afar have also honored me by taking my work seriously and nurturing my intellectual development—especially Chuck Morris, Rosa Eberly, Karen Lovaas, Dan Brouwer, Jennifer Wood, and John Sloop. Finally, I would be nothing without my fellow citizens in the graduate community at UT. I owe unending affection and gratitude to Adria Battaglia, Meredith Bagley, Luke Winslow, Jaime Wright, Jennifer Asenas, Kevin Johnson, Roger Gatchet, John McKenzie, Roy Christopher, Josh Hanan, Robert McDonald, Diana Martinez, Kristin Stimpson, among many others. I am particularly indebted to Matt Morris for proofreading this document. They have comforted, challenged, and entertained me over the past four years. I will miss this place deeply.

The true source of this project is the everyday struggles of people working for change and suffering under the brute apparatuses of an unforgiving and exploitative society. Thus, my activist family in Austin and elsewhere deserves thanks. I specifically

want to acknowledge Lily Hughes, Mike Corwin, Kelly Booker, Matt Beamesderfer, Matt Korn, Laura Brady, Karen Burke, Jeneanne Scott, and Stefanie Collins for standing alongside me in struggle and always reminding me to draw theory from practice. As I note in my dedication, the family members of those languishing on Texas's death row—especially Lawrence, Kenneth, and Nydesha Foster, Sandra Reed, Delia Perez-Meyer, and Terri Been—remind me why I do what I do. And of course, Kenneth Foster, Jr. is an inspiration to us all. Were it not for the movement—led by him and his family—that saved his life, this project would not have happened.

I am also grateful to those whose support and friendship got me this far. Susanna Bernat helped me develop a vocabulary for my emotions at the most difficult stages in this process. Clark Bernier continues to challenge me intellectually and grace me with unending loyalty. Katie Feyh deserves special gratitude for supporting me as a comrade, colleague, and dear friend. None of this, of course, would have been possible without my parents John and Julie McCann. I am grateful that they nurtured my many curiosities through life and am always humbled by their struggles and hard work over a lifetime. My class-consciousness begins with them. My sister Megan McCann has also been a constant source of support.

I should also acknowledge the Original Hip-Hop Lyrics Archive and Hip-Hop is Read, which served as online resources for researching lyrics and samples.

Finally, I am grateful to my best friend and the love of my life. Ashley Mack has provided a foundation for this project and all aspects of my life, loving me for me and helping me grow more comfortable in my own skin. From her proofreading to her encouragement, she is my partner through and through.

Contesting the Mark of Criminality: Resistance and Ideology in Gangsta Rap, 1988-1997

Publication No._____

Bryan John McCann, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2009

Supervisor: Dana L. Cloud

This dissertation situates the emergence of gangsta rap from 1988-1997 within the historical trajectory of the American criminal justice system and the mass incarceration of African Americans. Specifically, it examines how the genre enacted the *mark of criminality* as a gesture of resistance in a period of sustained moral panic surrounding race and criminality in the United States. The mark of criminality refers to a regime of signifiers inscribed upon African American bodies that imagines black subjects as fundamental threats to social order. Drawing upon the theoretical resources of historical materialism and cultural studies, the project locates the mark of criminality within the social structures of capitalism, arguing that hegemonic fantasies of racialized criminality protect oppressive and exploitative social relations. The project concludes that while gangsta rap has many significant limitations associated with violence, misogyny, and commercialism, it nonetheless represents a salient expression of resistance that can inform broader interventions against the American prisons system. A number of questions guide this project. Chief among them are the following: In what ways does the

criminal justice system operate as a site of rhetorical invention and hegemonic struggle? To what extent does gangsta rap enable and disable rhetorical and political agency? To what extent does it enable and disable interracial political practice? What are the implications of gangsta rap for a gendered politics of criminality?

Three case studies demonstrate how specific gangsta rap artists inverted the mark of criminality toward the constitution of affirmative and resistant fantasies of black criminality. While the work of these artists, I argue, was significantly limited in its emancipatory potential, it nonetheless offered important insights into the contingency of race and crime in America. The project also considers how other rhetors responded to gangsta discourse, frequently toward the end of supporting hegemonic notions of race and criminality. The dissertation concludes that criminality functions as a vibrant site of rhetorical invention and resistance provided it is articulated to broader movements for social justice. While the often-problematic discourses of gangsta rap do not constitute politically progressive rhetorics in their own rights, they provide resources for the articulation of righteous indignation and utopian desires capable of challenging the prison-industrial complex.

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Prologue: Rapping Across Experience, or Why White Boys Should Study Gangsta Rap

> Oh yeah and another thing/For all ya niggaz that don't do gangsta rap/Don't get on TV talkin' about gangsta rap/Cause 9 times at a 10 you don't know the fuck you talk about/Talk about that bullshit rap you do/Stay the fuck out of mine.
>
> - Ice Cube, "Gangsta Rap Made Me Do It"

Gangsta rap icon Ice Cube's words indict anyone not immersed in the political and cultural history of gangsta rap. As I document in the following chapters, gangsta is a genre born of decades of capital flight and mass incarceration experienced by inner city African Americans in the United States. It is an expression and resistant enactment of a regime of signifiers associated with race and criminality—what I call *the mark of criminality*—that has helped rationalize unprecedented levels of mass incarceration in the United States. In this project, I argue that these enactments, while deeply flawed, nonetheless hold political potential that can inform the rhetorical practices of broader social movements against the American prison system. Ice Cube and the other African American artists I describe made careers packaging and selling the mark of criminality for their own profit while simultaneously sparking profound levels of public backlash and deliberation about the place of such music in civil society. More broadly, the subsequent dialogue over gangsta rap was nothing less than an epic confrontation over the meaning of race and crime in the United States. I have chosen to do the difficult work of extrapolating emancipatory potential from this genre that is often offensive and difficult to defend. Before justifying the study of this fraught mode of vernacular expression, I feel I must first justify my own relationship to it. I do not *do* gangsta rap. What business, then, do I have talking about it?

I am a white male scholar interrogating the enactment of black criminality through rap music. I cannot even claim, as many of my white peers during the late 1980s and early 1990s could, to be a longtime fan of gangsta. When *Straight Outta Compton* was making record industry history, I was, at best, enamored with the sanitized raps of M.C. Hammer and Vanilla Ice. I was more likely spending my time poring over my parents' vinyl record collection, discovering rock acts of the 1960s and 1970s like the Doors, the Talking Heads, David Bowie, the Rolling Stones, and the Beatles.

However, all U.S. citizens possess a material and discursive relationship to the American criminal justice system, whether articulated through cultural consumption or grassroots struggle. My first encounters with law and order came during childhood visits to the Holy Sepulchre Cemetery in suburban Alsip, Illinois outside of Chicago. The gravestone of my father's childhood friend, William Fahey, was engraved with a City of Chicago Police shield. All I knew of Fahey was that he died violently in the line of duty at the hands of a black assailant.[1] I knew only to admire the sacrifice he made so that I might live in a safer world.

Like any number of young white males coming of age in the Chicago South Suburbs, I grew to valorize law enforcement through a litany of action films. The popular *Lethal Weapon* series, various martial arts films, and several television police dramas elevated law enforcement to heroic heights. In grade school, I even fantasized about becoming a police officer or joining the Federal Bureau of Investigation. However, as I matured, I began to consume more subversive forms of cultural expression, including the Beatnik writers of the late 1950s and 1960s, as well as politically-infused punk bands who espoused a radical brand of politics at odds with the law and order discourses performed at the gravesides of fallen officers like William Fahey. For example, it was my curiosity with anarcho-left music and politics that led me to the case of Mumia Abu-

Jamal, who has been on Pennsylvania's death row for over 25 years for the shooting death of a white Philadelphia police officer. Abu-Jamal's incendiary political commentary and compelling innocence claim have made his case a potent site of political organizing on the left.[2] My interest in the case quickly became a point of contention between my father and me, whose conservative rearing in a working class Irish Catholic household on the Chicago South Side and loss of his friend in uniform made it difficult to sympathize with a politically radical Black man accused of murdering a white police officer.[3] For my part, I began seeing embedded within the criminal justice system an entire history of institutional oppression that rendered my father's friend's death a tragic, but far more complicated narrative than a story of police heroism would suggest.

My proximity to gangsta rap grew closer when I became a doctoral student in Texas. I became directly involved in grassroots struggle against the death penalty, working alongside other activists and family members of the condemned. These families were often racial minorities and always economically disadvantaged. Their willingness to speak against state killing came in spite of widespread public stigma associated with having loved ones on the nation's most notorious death row. The State of Texas executes more of its citizens than any state in the union, and fidelity to this mode of frontier justice runs deep in the state's collective psyche.[4] Nonetheless, a handful of brave families saw fit to contest the discourses of racialized fear inscribed upon their sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, or mothers and fathers. This meant also resisting their own stigmatization, as well as that experienced by their communities as a whole. As I argue throughout this dissertation, racialized subjects must operate within hegemonic discourses of moral panic associated with the criminal justice system. Experiencing the activism of Texas's death row families was my first opportunity to witness ordinary citizens negotiating and resisting these discourses.

During the summer of 2007, I participated in a grassroots campaign that successfully halted the execution of a young African American man named Kenneth Foster, Jr. Kenneth was sentenced to death in 1996 for driving a car containing another man, Mauriceo Brown, who exited the vehicle after a night of robberies in San Antonio and shot Michael LaHood to death. Although he did not pull the trigger, Kenneth was subject to the death penalty by virtue of Texas's so-called Law of Parties. Aside from the resonance of a death penalty case in which the defendant, a black man, quite literally *did not kill the victim*, Kenneth was an altogether interesting figure. Born to drug addicted parents in Austin, Texas, he spent much of his childhood living with his grandparents in San Antonio. At the time of his arrest for Michael LaHood's murder, Kenneth's ambition was to be a hip-hop artist. This was one of many factors that sealed Kenneth's fate in his original trial, as the prosecution read some of his more graphic lyrics aloud to startle the jury during the sentencing phase. He was cast as a "gangsta" unworthy of life in civil society.[5]

As a resident of Texas's death row, Kenneth quickly began establishing connections with the outside world, including a pen pal relationship with me. He devoured writings by Marx, Lenin, Mao, and Huey Newton. He identified closely with Black Power/Nationalist tendencies and admired radical activist groups working against the prison system. He also actively organized his fellow inmates and participated in coordinated acts of nonviolent civil disobedience.[6] With both a provocative case and penchant for political analysis, Kenneth attracted a number of fellow travelers, including his wife, Dutch rapper Tasha "Jav'lin" Narez. Tasha composed a rap song about Kenneth's case entitled "Walk With Me" whose video spread far and wide across the Internet and was instrumental in bringing attention to our cause.[7] During that long

summer of 2007, we also held a hip-hop benefit for Kenneth where several local acts volunteered their talent.

The hip-hop nation loomed large in the Save Kenneth Foster Campaign. As I began listening more closely to this genre, I took note of its embrace and enactment of the very discourses of racism and fear that I observed rationalizing capital punishment and mass incarceration in Texas and beyond. Several of the artists who performed at our San Antonio concert valorized drug consumption and violence, whereas a Florida-based political group called dead prez—whom I discuss in more detail at the close of this project—imagined criminality as a source of righteous political resistance. As I looked further into the history of these provocative rhetorical strategies, I revisited the controversies associated with N.W.A. and their anti-police lyrics, the misogynistic discourses of leisure deployed by Dr. Dre and Snoop Doggy Dogg, and, of course, the iconic status of Tupac Shakur, whose violent death coincided with my own political development as a high school student.

Stories that unfolded along the periphery of my youth now stood at the center as I interrogated anew the politics of race and criminality. I quickly came to recognize that at the precise moments when I was developing my own discursive relationship to the politics of criminality—whether at the grave of William Fahey or through the indignant performances of punk musicians—an assortment of artists were developing alternative enactments of discourses that had rendered young African American males the most feared population in the United States.

As I demonstrate on the following pages, the musings of gangsta artists do not represent the eloquent words and political clarity of seasoned death row activists. But then again, neither have the words of the Texas death row mother abruptly forced to reckon with her own startling enfoldment within a vast history of discipline and

punishment whose roots run far deeper than her own individual nightmare. The voices of the marginalized do not emerge fully formed and capable of cogently speaking to power. They are more often ambivalent, even degraded voices that pose as many problems as they do solutions. In the case of gangsta rap, a genre whose revenue depends on sensationalized discourses of black criminality, the problems are plentiful. However, we ignore these voices that were able to spark forceful national dialogue on race and crime at the close of the 20th Century at our own peril. I write what follows with an investment in a continuity between the violent and immature rap lyrics of a young Kenneth Foster, and the powerful movement—led by Kenneth and his family—that helped save his life.

I do not ultimately know if my accounting for my relationship to gangsta rap can satisfy the likes of a veteran like Ice Cube. However, while I am not statistically as likely to enter a prison cell as an African American male my age, the criminal justice system has nonetheless played a role in how I imagine my subjectivity *vis-à-vis* broader social structures. Indeed, I believe this to be the case for all Americans. Those of us invested in challenging the daunting mechanisms of supervision, confinement, and death that comprise our criminal justice system must stand prepared to account for our own relationship to criminality, as well as the strategies those most directly targeted for imprisonment have enlisted to reckon with their precarious subject positions. A coherent and unified struggle capable of challenging the prison system and the interests it defends relies on a stubborn commitment to reaching across experiential boundaries and finding resistant potential in the "raps" of others.

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[1] The assailant, Andrew Wilson, would eventually be instrumental in unearthing a torture scandal at the Chicago Police Department. Conroy 2007.
[2] Bisson 2000.
[3] Such a heritage, of course, is fundamentally ambivalent. My father has spent most of his life as a union member and supporter of the Democratic Party.

[4] For state-by-state information on the death penalty, see the Death Penalty Information Center, http://deathpenaltyinfo.org/state_by_state (accessed 8 June 2009). For commentary on the death penalty and Texas culture, see McCann 2008.
[5] McCann 2007; Smith 2005.
[6] Kenneth is a founding member of the Death Row Inner-Communalist Vanguard Engagement, which performs such acts of civil disobedience. See http://www.drivemovement.org/ (accessed 8 June 2009).
[7] Jav'lin's video can be viewed online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UaJdrxT8hiY (accessed 8 June 2009).

Introduction: Reading Race, Crime, and Culture Rhetorically and Materially

A recent study by the Pew Charitable Trusts revealed that the United States incarcerates over one in one hundred of its citizens.[1] Joining these nearly 2.4 million men and women are over 5 million people under probation or parole.[2] These findings confirm what both critics and purveyors of penal policy in the United States have long suspected: ours is an incarceration nation.[3] No country—not even such human rights pariahs as China, Iran, or North Korea—imprisons a larger percentage of its population than the United States.

Albeit a distant and abstract institution for many citizens, the criminal justice system permeates literally every facet of American life. As members of the non-profit organization The Sentencing Project have expertly documented, mass incarceration has devastating impacts on marginalized communities by imprisoning breadwinners or rendering them undesirable in the eyes of employers, as well as disenfranchising potential voters.[4] Furthermore, the construction of prisons and the broader national apparatus of criminal justice is incredibly expensive. The Pew study found that states, on average, spend nearly $24,000 per inmate each year. California spends a staggering $8.8 billion annually on its prison system with expenditures for corrections growing at a faster rate than those for higher education.[5] In the meantime, private contractors generate profits through the staffing, supplying, construction, and management of prison facilities across the country. At the heart of what journalist Eric Schlosser notoriously named the "prison-industrial complex" is the tragic irony that there exists little compelling evidence that mass incarceration reduces crime in the United States. The most recent data on national recidivism rates show that nearly 70% of individuals who exit prison facilities in the

United States will return, suggesting that the American justice system is complicit in the *production of criminality*.[6] In other words, the continued growth of the prison-industrial complex has had detrimental effects on crime rates, the economy, education, and representative democracy.

The character of the nation's prison system is even more troubling when one accounts for the role of race in arrests, convictions, and sentencing. According to the Pew report, one in nine African American males between the ages of 20 and 34 are in prison.[7] Numerous studies have shown that African Americans, especially men, are more likely to be stopped by police, more likely to be arrested, and generally receive harsher sentences than their white counterparts who commit the same crime.[8] These troubling statistics are themselves part and parcel of a long and devastating relationship between the African American community and American capitalism. The prison has played a central role in organizing black life, culture, and labor from Reconstruction to the present day.[9] Accordingly, the belief that the criminal justice system is the chief site of racial struggle in America drives my analysis in this dissertation.

Criminal justice and mass incarceration are matters of rhetorical importance. To understand how our culture represents punishment is to not only expose how ordinary people come to accept the incarceration of over 2 million of their fellow citizens, but to gain insight into the broader regimes of power and social antagonisms that underlie the totality of contemporary American society. Furthermore, the criminal justice system functions as synecdoche for racial struggle in the United States. The complex, often deadly relationships between black Americans, the prison system, police officers, politicians, the drug trade, and a host of other variables offer rhetorical scholars inroads toward a richer understanding of how race and struggle function as problems for citizens in general and communication scholars in particular.

This dissertation considers the hip-hop genre of *gangsta rap* and its many public controversies at the end of the 20th Century to be instances of hegemonic struggle over race and criminality in the United States. I believe gangsta rap to be the chief form of cultural resistance to both the imprisonment of black bodies over the past 20 plus years and what I will call the *mark of criminality* inscribed upon African American subjects during this time. It is my position that while gangsta rap is an incredibly ambivalent genre, it nonetheless retains a resistant emancipatory impulse that can inform broader struggles for criminal justice reform. Furthermore, those who so fervently attacked gangsta rap during its heyday—the years 1988-1997—were complicit in reifying the very hegemonic discourses of racialized criminality that helped rationalize mass incarceration. Ultimately, I conclude that although gangsta was a genre pregnant with potential, it failed to produce an artist—or what I describe as a messiah—capable of excavating its emancipatory content. Whether the urban guerrilla warfare of N.W.A., the leisurely exodus of the G-funk era, or the degraded messianic potential of Tupac Shakur's "Thug Life," gangsta's artists left a legacy laden with contradictions and shortcomings. Nonetheless, I believe the genre remains capable of informing critical interventions into America's fantasies of criminality.

My project uses the methodological resources of historical materialism and cultural studies to map the ways gangsta rap artists circulated hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses of racialized criminality, as well as the many impassioned mainstream responses to the genre's staggering popularity. Gangsta rap is, without doubt, one of the most controversial forms of popular culture to ever emerge in the United States. By interrogating this complex genre, I believe critics can acquire a richer understanding of how race and crime function rhetorically in the United States.

Like most other cultural genres, gangsta resists concrete definition. Michael Quinn describes it as "a genre based on the construction of an urban mise-en-scène of drugs, rape and murder."[10] Prominent hip-hop scholar S. Craig Watkins writes that many regard gangsta's dramatized portrayals of inner-city crime and violence as "the unfiltered voice of a generation of angry and alienated young black men who inhabited America's abandoned ghettos."[11] Yet, others have described the most commercially successful category of hip-hop as "a shrewd, market-driven performance that craftily exploited America's fear of poor, ghetto youths."[12] Most importantly for the aims of this dissertation, gangsta, in the words of Eithne Quinn, was shaped by "the social ills that resulted from the deindustrialization and destructive government policies" perpetrated by the Reagan, first Bush, and Clinton administrations at the end of the 20th Century.[13]

Gangsta can best be defined by its most controversial characteristic: the rhetorical deployment of the very racially charged discourses of criminality used to justify the mass imprisonment of black Americans. Like the so-called "Blaxploitation" films of the 1970s, gangsta rap enlists often damaging stereotypical discourses and images in ways that are intended to be empowering and resistant, if also commercial and problematic.[14] Legal scholar Imani Perry explains,

> It would be simple if hip hop simply provided sociological analyses of black urbanity. However, numerous hip hop artists instead exploit the white fear of the black assailant as a source of power. In so doing, they mimic and adopt the very American construction of the black monster.[15]

As Jeffrey Ogbar notes, committing crime and spending time in prison is the primary source of gangsta's chief source of cultural capital: authenticity.[16] Gangsta ethos is inextricably bound to the artist's resistant relationship to the American criminal justice system through his often illicit pursuits of the American dream, fidelity to the "'hood," hypermasculinity and sexuality, violent tendencies, and, in many cases, actual encounters

with violence and law enforcement. Writing for the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1993, journalist Chuck Phillips called gangsta rap "the most dramatic confluence of violent art and violent reality the modern pop world has ever witnessed."[17] The gangsta persona is, in other words, chillingly similar to the archetypal violent black male so often used throughout history to justify the subordination and incarceration of African American men.[18]

Yet, Perry argues that such personas represent an important element of gangsta's political promise, writing, "While it is true that some hip hop romanticizes violence or crime, far more of it *explains* it and makes a case for listeners to evaluate."[19] At the height of their notoriety, members of the group N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude) described themselves as "underground street reporters" who represented the realities of black urban life in the United States.[20] Others locate gangsta's sensationalistic tales of crime and sex within the ironic and playful black vernacular tradition best theorized as *signifying* by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.[21] Eithne Quinn advocates reading gangsta as part of a broader black folklore tradition, noting how popular gangsta rappers embody the characteristics of mythical bad men like Stagger Lee and Dolomite. She writes,

> A history of violence, exploitation, and the withholding of civil rights all shaped and perpetuated the ludic, self-conscious stories of sex, violence, and mayhem prevalent in working-class black lore. Underpinning such extremist expressions was the knowledge they were symptomatic: the violent gut reactions to a persisting legacy of racism and exclusion that…extended into the improvisatory forms of the black migratory aesthetic.[22]

Gangsta rap is, thus, in a variety of ways, a continuation of a long tradition of black vernacular practices, or *toasts*. However, Quinn adds, "Mass mediation opened up new ways to garner interest and maximize publicity…and of course, in turn, new ways to

regulate and repress."[23] In other words, with the wider circulation of such discourses, came the subsequent need to contain them.

Some scholars doubt the political capacity of such dramatic deployments of racialized urban transgression. While I shall note the limitations of insights such as Perry's, I fundamentally agree with such scholars that the genre partakes in a complex, often degraded, form of cultural resistance against prevailing fantasies of black criminality. Thus, the rhetoric of this genre's artists, its detractors, and other connected agents represents nothing less than a struggle over the relationship between black subjectivity and the prison-industrial complex.

Gangsta rap and its cultural parent, hip-hop, are, of course, familiar sites of analysis for cultural studies and rhetorical scholars. In addition to the excellent investigations cited above, many writers within the discipline of communication studies have navigated the complex contours of the rap phenomenon. For example, Murray Forman has advanced a "spatial perspective" of hip-hop. He documents the ways "minority youth use rap in the deployment of discourses of urban space and more proximate scales of urban locality, or place."[24] He writes, "Identities forged in the 'hood are products of spatial compression and are deeply influenced by locally sustaining bonds cohering within the more narrowly defined social parameters of space."[25] In other words, Forman understands hip-hop as the production of subjectivities *vis-à-vis* different *types* of locale, ranging from the symbolic to the literal. As I note in this study, *criminalized* spaces, particularly southern Los Angeles County, play a vital role in the constitution of subjects within and around gangsta rap.

Eric King Watts describes gangsta rap as "spectacular consumption," arguing that the genre functions at the nexus between street authenticity and market demands.[26] Describing what he understands to be the central consumerist dynamic of gangsta, Watts writes, "As street codes get explosively commodified and artists get juiced beyond their maddest dreams, they are compelled to maintain their celebrity status by 'authenticating' their self-presentations in increasingly grittier street terms."[27] For Watts, gangsta rap partakes in the commodification of ghetto subjectivity. The genre is also, I argue, in the business of commodifying *black criminality*. However, Watts would also reject the impulse to dismiss the gangsta project altogether as crass commercialism. In his analysis of the Harlem Renaissance—a cultural forbearer to hip-hop—Watts argues that critics must trouble "the norms and premises that authorize or demoralize public speech" in order to open "the inventional possibilities of contemporary rhetorical culture."[28] I agree with Watts that we must avoid the temptation to distinguish between "pure" and "impure" art and, instead, consider how even the most unsettling forms of vernacular expression might "imagine and express alternative and previously unseen ideals of social justice."[29]

Other rhetorical and cultural studies theorists have surveyed the controversies associated with white male rappers like Eminem, the role of the hip-hop video in troubling the voyeuristic gaze of white supremacy, and the ways white consumption of hip-hop might foster that very gaze.[30] I am, in other words, intervening in a broad trajectory of literature that raises as many questions as it answers. My move in this project, or what I consider to be my primary contribution to the study of hip-hop and,

more specifically, gangsta rap, is to locate it within the material relations associated with race and criminality in American capitalism. Although many scholars have noted the relationship between gangsta rap and the criminal justice system, they generally understand the latter as a site and consequence of discursive production.[31] While this project hinges on no less an understanding of the prison-industrial complex, I further engage the prison and its sustaining discursive regimes as a site of social relations connected to class struggle and the development of market capitalism. Gangsta, in other words, does not simply *represent* the confrontation between the urban black community and the prison-industrial complex; it operates within the dialectical space between black subjectivity, the prison system, and capital.

An important assumption of this work is that *crime is political*. By this, I do not mean simply that politics inform public policies related to crime and punishment. The role of class, race, gender, nation, and other political categories in shaping penal policy is well documented.[32] Nor is my argument simply that crime is politicized, becoming the object of political campaigns competing to be tougher on crime and criminals. *Rather, I am arguing that crime is in itself an act of political agency*. As historian Peter Linebaugh states plainly in his study of political economy and crime in eighteenth century England, "In short, people became so poor that they stole to live, and their misappropriating led to manifold innovations in civil society."[33] If political struggle is at its very core about survival (and I believe it to be), then crime is no doubt political.[34] Although the practices of a criminal will not be as politically conscious or beneficial as those of a street protestor or community organizer, they nonetheless partake in the social antagonisms that give

form and shape to political and rhetorical subjectivity. While crime from a punitive standpoint enables myriad discourses of racial, gender, and class scapegoating, it similarly enables alternative discourses of criminal behavior from the perspective of, or on behalf of, the incarcerated and their communities.[35]

Gangsta rap is indispensable in accessing the crucial, if unsettling, political character of criminal behavior because it enlists the discourses of violence, accumulation, sexuality, and place so often used to justify the incarceration of one in nine young African American men, toward the end of constituting black agency *and acquiring substantial monetary profits in the process*.[36] However, much of this genre is misogynistic, homophobic, diversionary, obscene, divisive, and sensationalistic. It can be damaging to interracial anti-racist struggle and the lives of the very inner-city youths it claims to represent. Many gangsta rap artists not only reify the very criminal acts and discourses that result in high levels of incarceration, but also espouse worldviews that are deeply harmful to women, gays and lesbians, as well as other non-black minority groups (e.g. Jews, Koreans).[37] The genre is also notoriously vulnerable to appropriation by white audiences, possibly fanning the flames of racism in the process.[38] Thus, to say that crime—whether literal or rhetorical—constitutes political practice is not to say that it is *good* political practice. Yet, it is equally important to resist the temptation to dismiss gangsta on the basis of its problematic characteristics. We should, rather, heed the advice of historian Robin D.G. Kelley:

> [It] would be a mistake to dismiss gangsta rap and other genres of hip hop as useless creations of the marketplace. If we want to know the political climate

> among urban youth, we should still listen to the music and, most importantly, to the young people who fill the deadened, congested spaces of the city with these sonic forces.[39]

Similarly, I believe that if we are to truly understand the rhetorical characteristics of race and criminality in the United States, we must interrogate the numerous dimensions of the musical genre that so forcefully helped place race and crime on the American agenda at the close of the 20th Century. In doing so, we may just learn what constructive political content lies within the criminal act and its accompanying rhetorical expressions, and begin asking how we might articulate such potential to a broader emancipatory project that can confront not only crime and mass incarceration, but the very social structures that enable them.

A number of questions guide this project. Chief among them are the following: In what ways does the criminal justice system operate as a site of rhetorical invention and hegemonic struggle? To what extent does gangsta rap enable and disable rhetorical and political agency? To what extend does it enable and disable interracial political practice? What are the implications of gangsta rap for a gendered politics of criminality? This project as a whole partakes in asking a much grander question at the heart of materialist critique: How do subjects use rhetoric to articulate their relationships to social structures and how do those structures enable and constrain subjectivity? These questions, although largely premised upon the theoretical assumptions I outline below and in the first section of this project, also enable me to test those very assumptions through a reading of gangsta rap as a popular cultural commodity, site of public controversy, and form of protest rhetoric. In what remains of this introduction, I briefly describe communication scholarship's role in engaging the American prison system and elaborate my methodological approach to gangsta rap.

CRIME, PUNISHMENT, AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES

Why should the stark realities of the criminal justice system and its relationship to race concern communication scholars? As a practical matter, anyone who teaches in a university setting should take pause when institutions of higher learning must compete with the concrete and steel structures that warehouse men and women who most likely never attended college or even graduated from high school.[40] Myriad studies have found education—whether prior to, during, or after incarceration—to be the chief deterrent to criminal activity. In spite of this fact, states continue to slash funds for both their schools and education programs within prison walls while simultaneously pouring resources into the construction of new prisons. In many sectors of the country, more African American men are in prison than in colleges or universities. [41] Thus, there is a professional imperative on the part of all educators to engage our nation's high rate of imprisonment.

In addition, for a field committed to the study of rhetoric and culture, the prison system is itself a salient site of analysis. The Prison Communication, Activism, Research and Education (P-CARE) writing collective, of which I am a member, argues that the problem of incarceration is a quintessentially—but by no means exclusively—communicative one. As we wrote in a recent journal article:

> We are so saturated with images of crime and criminality that incarceration has become a routine part of our daily consumerist practices and political assumptions, yet actual prisons and prisoners remain virtually invisible in television news and entertainment. Contemporary US popular culture has thus become a spectacular carousel of fantasies about crime and criminals, meaning that the prison-industrial complex has become the stuff of our escapist frivolities and our political consciousness.[42]

Such rhetorical scholars as John Sloop, Carol Stabile, Jennifer Wood, Marouf Hasian, Lisa Flores, Stephen Hartnett, Caroline Picart, and myself have described the many ways that discourses of crime and punishment have marginalized poor people, women, and

ethnic minorities while simultaneously rationalizing the punishing power of the state.[43] Michel Foucault, whose study of the prison remains a canonical work of contemporary thought, noted that regimes of punishment are referential to something other than the punishing act as such and that ours is a carceral society that produces docile self-surveiling bodies.[44] Sloop argues, "The behavior, morality, and subjectivity of all members of a culture are tied to the way misbehavior, particularly via characterizations of prisoners, is represented in mass-media outlets and public arguments."[45]

Past research regarding what one might call the prison-*cultural* complex has been profoundly instrumental in illuminating the much broader relationship between power and culture. Yet, I share a concern voiced by Linebaugh:

> One cannot help but note the unilateral nature of the [popular scholarly] concept [of crime], the fact that it entails an approach to the question that must accept capital's point of view without adequately reconstituting the concept with working-class determinants. One remembers that the life and works of Malcolm X and George Jackson [the controversial incarcerated Black Panther], far from being contained within incidental, "marginal sectors," became leading international reference points for a whole cycle of struggle.[46]

In other words, the agency of the men and women who occupy prison and jail cells across the country remains largely absent in studies of our nation's culture of incarceration. There are, of course, exceptions to this tendency. Scholars such as Hartnett, Eleanor Novek, and Edward Hinck have done indispensable pedagogical and scholarly work associated with empowering the voices of the incarcerated through poetry, journalism, and competitive debate.[47] In addition to enabling prisoners to envision intellectual, political, even metaphysical possibilities outside of the prison, I believe we should also consider the political and rhetorical possibilities embedded within the criminal subject and criminal act as such. As Linebaugh argues, those historically targeted for punishment are active participants in constituting the structures of criminality and, consequentially,

their rhetorical and cultural expressions. In fact, Linebaugh claims and convincingly documents how forms of crime, particularly theft, played a crucial role in shaping civil society and market capitalism.[48] While there is no denying the devastating impact that crime and mass incarceration have on numerous sectors of American life, equally important is the role of the incarcerated and their communities in shaping the symbolic and material conditions at the foundation of the prison-industrial complex.

CRIME AND/AS CULTURAL RESISTANCE

Those affected by police brutality, mass incarceration, and the resulting forms of disenfranchisement have found many outlets for expression and agitation. For example, Dylan Rodriguez argues that mass incarceration has produced a growing number of "imprisoned radical intellectuals" who "critically envision (and sometimes strategize) the displacement or termination of the epochal American production of biological and cultural genocides, mass-based bodily violence, racialized domestic warfare, and targeted coercive misery."[49] In other words, incarceration can itself be a radicalizing experience capable of enhancing critical capacities and motivating rhetorical practice. Such individuals through the years have included George Jackson and Mumia Abu-Jamal, as well as Leonard Peltier, Angela Davis, Ramsey Muniz, Marilyn Buck, and, as I have already noted, Kenneth Foster, Jr.[50] As Linebaugh and Rodriguez observe, these writers have played leading roles not only in their own struggles for vindication and release, but within larger movements for social change.[51]

Incarceration, however, can politicize not only the incarcerated but also their communities. It is this plain fact that turns me to hip-hop and gangsta rap. More than a genre of music, hip-hop represents a rich cultural form in the African American vernacular tradition. It is comprised of rapping (rhythmic spoken lyrics), break beats (the

sampling of drum loops), DJing, graffiti, break dancing, and a host of other cultural practices that began to evolve in predominantly black urban areas during the 1970s.[52] Hip-hop was forged in the furnace of capital flight from American inner cities during the late 1970s and early 1980s, coupled with the proliferation of the street gangs that filled the power vacuum (and eventually the prisons) following the decimation of the Black Panthers and other politically active organizations.[53] The conditions that gave rise to the contemporary warehousing of African Americans in prisons also enabled the invention of hip-hop as a cultural form. As both Republicans and Democrats slowly dismantled the New Deal and Great Society, ordinary Americans of all races paid dearly.[54] But as is nearly always the case at times of significant social transformation in the United States, the African American community absorbed a disproportionate amount of this collateral damage. As many working class blacks steadily lost jobs and prospects, some turned to crime (e.g. theft, drug dealing) and alternative forms of social organization (i.e. street gangs) in order to survive and thrive outside the conventions of a culture and economy that had excluded them. Of course, these illegal behaviors and a sustained culture war against poor black men and women resulted in the alarming rates of incarceration we experience today.[55] Hip-hop emerged as what Kenneth Burke calls "equipment for living" under such conditions.[56]

I have chosen to focus on hip-hop because it is quite possibly the single most important form of African American cultural expression to emerge in the wake of the relentless incarceration of black men and women over the past 30-plus years.[57] The genre is incredibly controversial. Numerous culture warriors and politicians on all points of the political spectrum have targeted its explicit lyrics, frequent misogyny and homophobia, and especially gangsta rap's valorization of violence and criminal activity.[58] Yet, hip-hop retains a vibrant tradition of forceful and often sophisticated political critique that has led

authors like Tricia Rose, Cornel West, and Michael Eric Dyson to defend the genre—even as they criticize it—as one of the best hopes for a modern anti-racist politics.[59] Hip-hop, in other words, is a cultural form pregnant with political potential, while remaining unsettling and potentially very destructive.

Hip-hop music is broadly understood as a genre whose origins trace back to Jamaican Reggae. Arguably, Jamaican-born Clive "DJ Kool Herc" Campbell originated the genre in the Bronx during the early 1970s. Chang describes one of Campbell's fundamental discoveries that paved the way for the emergence of hip-hop:

> The moment when the dancers really got wild was in a song's short instrumental break, when the band would drop out and the rhythm section would get elemental. Forget melody, chorus, songs—it was all about the groove, building it, keeping it going. Like a string theorist, Herc zeroed in on the fundamental vibrating loop at the heart of the record, the break.[60]

Campbell helped launch an entire movement of young African American DJs who used homemade sound systems to experiment with soul, funk, rock, and other genres to forge a distinct sound. Campbell also helped launch the syncopated and rhymed lyrical accompaniment that would come to be known as *rapping*. Campbell influenced legions of other DJs, most notably Afrika Bambaataa and Joseph "Grandmaster Flash" Saddler.[61]

Rap emerged as a musical genre defined by the techniques that Campbell, Bambaataa, and Saddler helped create and refine. In 1979, the Sugarhill Gang recorded the hugely successful single "Rapper's Delight" and helped seal hip-hop's fate as a viable and successful part of American popular culture, rather than a mere urban fad.[62] Throughout the 1980s, acts such as Run-DMC and LL Cool J, as well as white rappers like the Beastie Boys, grew in popularity and hip-hop became a pronounced cultural force.[63] New York-based group Public Enemy flanked such commercial successes with their own brand of politically charged hip-hop. Informed by Black Nationalism and

outraged by what the past decade had wrought on the African American community, Public Enemy forged a body of work that was both incendiary and popular. Many in the black community—particularly intellectuals and veterans of the Civil Rights era—began to take hip-hop seriously as a potentially resistant, even emancipatory force. Not only had its success across racial boundaries helped to integrate previously closed sectors of the entertainment industry, but acts like Public Enemy also represented the genre's capacity for pointed political critique.[64]

Entering the fray: Considering the texts of gangsta rap

Developed during the late 1980s, gangsta rap came to express, reflect, romanticize, and commodify the violent lifestyles of many inner-city youths. It emerged from the ashes of the Reagan administration's brutal "war on drugs" and accompanying cuts in social programs for disadvantaged inner-city communities. Both conservative and liberal public figures have routinely attacked gangsta rap as a destructive cultural force for black youth, even pressuring record companies to cease producing gangsta rap albums.[65] Gangsta's explosive cultural impact, for many, raised serious doubts about the emancipatory potential of hip-hop. Gangsta rap valorizes worlds and behaviors ranging from cop killing to rape that citizens find both terrifying and enticing, while nonetheless retaining a critique of the social structures that gave rise to street gangs, inner city crime, and the staggering racial disparities that permeate every structure of American society. Because gangsta rap is deeply connected to the social dynamics that have led to the mass incarceration of black bodies in America, employs the very discourses that others use to scapegoat and criminalize African Americans, is a highly successful genre capable of reaching and influencing millions of young citizens of all races, and has sparked

widespread public controversy, it warrants the attention of rhetorical scholars interested in race, culture, ideology, and America's exploding prison population.

Enlisting the methodological tool of historical materialist critique, I argue that the rhetorical strategies of gangsta artists over the past two decades represents a sustained—if often problematic—front on a racial and class struggle waged upon the terrain of the criminal justice system. Historical materialism focuses upon the dialectical relationship between discourse and historically constituted social relations.[66] Gangsta rap is both a cultural representation of the material and political conditions associated with black mass incarceration since the 1980s, as well as a politics of criminality in its own right. The genre represents black criminalized subjects *and* (re)constitutes them as active agents in America's inner-cities. Gangsta rap represents not simply a parodic redeployment of dominant discourses of race and criminality, but an active element in the creation of those very discourses.[67] Just as the thieves of Linebaugh's eighteenth century England played a role in shaping what did and did not "count" as crime, gangsta rap artists, for better or worse, partake in shaping the meaning and utility of criminality for specific communities.

The prospect of engaging a culture phenomenon as rich and complex as gangsta rap, not to mention hip-hop in general, is an exciting but daunting critical endeavor. There is no shortage of debates about where the genre originated, who its most important artists are, and precisely what "counts" as gangsta rap. For instance, Watkins locates the origins of gangsta rap on the East Coast while hip-hop journalist Jeff Chang writes, "Gangsta rap and postindustrial gangs did not begin in Compton, but a short distance north in Watts."[68] Robin D.G. Kelley looks further back in history to locate gangsta in its embryonic form, embedded in the sometimes-vulgar lyrical work of Ragtime musicians.[69] Gangsta, in other words, is a genre with no clear origin and even more obscure boundaries.

I do not envision this project as an exhaustive or authoritative treatment of the history of gangsta rap. Rather, as I have noted above, my interest is in gangsta's role in hegemonic struggle related to the constitution of a criminalized black subjectivity in American capitalist society. I have selected case studies spanning the years 1988-1997. Such a chronology accounts for gangsta's origins and its meteoric rise to cultural prominence during the end of the 20th Century. Such a timeframe is helpful not only for engaging the gangsta genre at its apex, but also intervenes critically in a time of considerable moral panic associated with race and criminality in the United States. Indeed, by 1988, the consequences of "Reaganomics" for black urban areas had become startlingly apparent as unemployment, drug sales, gang activity, and incarceration soared in areas like Los Angeles County.[70] The years following 1988 highlight the continuation of the Reagan legacy through his successor, George H.W. Bush, as well as Democratic President William Jefferson Clinton's draconian crime policies. In other words, 1988-1997 represents an era not only of gangsta's prominence as a cultural commodity, but also of intense moral panic and policy initiatives related to mass incarceration. The intersection between this moral panic and the incendiary, profit-driven rhymes of gangsta constituted a vitriolic battle over the meanings of race and criminality in the United States.

A text alone is far less interesting than its relationship to a broader climate of public deliberation and material relations related to the criminal justice system. I have thus chosen to focus on artists whose work prompted sustained and impassioned public response. My texts are the artists' words, lyrics, images, and music, but also the responses they generated and the provocative questions they raised. Toward this end, I first consider the work of the group Niggaz With Attitude (N.W.A.). Their 1988 album *Straight Outta Compton* is generally regarded as the single most important album in the

history of gangsta rap. In addition to selling over three million copies and being certified double platinum, the album introduced the entire country to gangsta rap.[71] As journalist Terry McDermott wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* fourteen years following the album's release,

> The music it contained was so perverse, so nihilistic, so forbidden, politicians—then and still—elbowed each other out of the way to condemn it. Highbrow critics couldn't find language strong enough to critique it; they went further, questioning whether it was even music at all. It's barbaric, they said. Hide the women and children; bar the doors. Too late. Gangsta rap was in the house.[72]

Politicians, law enforcement, and many members of the black community quickly chastised N.W.A. for encouraging violent, criminal behavior and reinforcing negative stereotypes about African American youth. The album also emerged at the height of intense cultural and political debate regarding obscenity and censorship in the music industry.[73] I, therefore, consider *Straight Outta Compton* not simply as an important album, but a *seismic rhetorical and cultural event*.

My case study considers the lyrics, music, and videos of N.W.A., as well as rhetorical interventions from those representing police and mainstream political interests who saw N.W.A. as a terrifying threat to law enforcement's prerogative of violence *vis-à-vis* race and criminality. Furthermore, I advance a reading of N.W.A. within the tradition of Black Nationalism, challenging the popular scholarly tendency to counterpoise their work with that of more politically lucid hip-hop acts like Public Enemy.[74] Specifically, I argue that N.W.A. functioned as self-fashioned *guerrillas* defending the criminalized urban streets of Compton from the encroachments of law enforcement and co-optation. While their entrenchment in musical commerce limited the political potential of their work, they nonetheless waged battle against those who sought to colonize their urban home within hegemonic fantasies of criminality.

My second case study chapter turns to Andre "Dr. Dre" Young's departure from N.W.A. and the subsequent release of his album *The Chronic* and Snoop Doggy Dogg's iconic *Doggystyle* under Dre and Marion "Suge" Knight's label, Death Row Records. Both albums represented the beginning of the so-called Gangsta-Funk, or G-Funk era of gangsta rap, characterized by Quinn as "the anomalous conflation of soft and hard; funk and gangsta; soulful and explicit; countrified and urban; nostalgic and contemporary."[75] Making use of slower, smoother melodies drawn largely from samples of 1970s funk music, G-Funk is notorious for its far more explicit embrace of conspicuous consumption, misogyny, and criminal conduct. Furthermore, both *The Chronic* and *Doggystyle* employed discourses of young black leisure practices that were becoming increasingly criminalized across the nation following the Los Angeles uprising of 1992 and a series of subsequent gang truces. These albums also prompted unprecedented legislative hearings on gangsta rap and its impact on American youth, initiated by veterans of the Civil Rights Movement who saw gangsta rap as an affront to their proud political heritage.[76] Because an older generation premised their condemnation of G-funk on the protection of black youth, I situate this era of gangsta rap within the folkloric narrative of the *Pied Piper* to highlight the politics of protecting children from the cultural opiates of gangsta rap. Indeed, while N.W.A. put gangsta rap on the cultural map, Dre and Snoop Dogg's rhetorics of leisure and criminality helped consolidate the genre as a site of resistance and moral panic.

My final case study examines the work of Tupac Shakur. Shakur is widely viewed the most important rap artist in history. So much has been said and written about Shakur—who performed under the pseudonyms 2Pac and Makaveli—that one might ask what is left to say.[77] However, it is my position that any consideration of gangsta rap's relationship to the American criminal justice system necessitates an encounter with

Shakur. Shakur's short life was marked by many sensationalized confrontations with the criminal justice system, including his 1994 conviction for rape, his near fatal shooting that same year, and his violent death in 1996. Moreover, his widely publicized feuds with East Coast rap artists represent what Forman calls "the single most divisive factor within the hip-hop nation to date."[78] Tupac Shakur, then, is both a rhetorical and embodied testament to the troubled relationship between the African American community and the criminal justice system. In this final case study, I read Shakur's central thematic of "Thug Life" as a potentially *messianic* gesture in the genre of gangsta rap whose emancipatory potential began to diminish as Shakur became more heavily invested in coastal battles and financial accumulation. Furthermore, I interrogate the role of mainstream discourses in disciplining Shakur in public memory, further stifling the resistant potential of his work. In other words, I demonstrate how a messiah can fall prey to the limitations of a politics of criminality founded on industry and retribution.

Because the boundaries of gangsta rap are so blurred, this dissertation will make occasional departures into the work of other artists whose relationships to my case studies offer important insights into the rhetorical, cultural, and political dimensions of gangsta rap, as well as racialized criminality. While these case studies are important in their own rights, they also constitute articulations of a much broader geography of music whose complexity illuminates the dynamics of cultural production associated with the race and the American criminal justice system.

Reading music as rhetoric

A project interested in the role of gangsta rap in shaping public discourse regarding race and criminality must obviously engage the genre's musical elements. For a rhetorician trained to study language, it is tempting to focus only on the lyrics of the

musical text without giving substantial attention to the music itself. However, as Susanne Langer argues, "When words and music come together in song, *music swallows words*… Song is not a compromise between poetry and music… The principles of music govern its form no matter what materials it uses."[79] Joshua Gunn and Mirko Hall describe how music is able to create the illusion of "losing" oneself because it "has the uncanny ability to involve, construct, and energize the body in accordance with rhythms, gestures, surfaces, and desires…[causing] listeners to experience their body and its social identity in new ways."[80] George Lipsitz observes how music—particularly that of the African Diaspora—is capable of circulating histories and subjectivities across eras, constituting what he identifies as a "diasporic dialogue."[81] The musical composition, in other words, contains a broad history of sonic references that fuse, in complex ways, peoples divided by history, geography, or differential marginality. Because music fulfills affective, even carnal, functions that need not even have lyrical accompaniment, while also circulating subjectivities across boundaries, it is essential for rhetorical critics to treat music as something other than mere epiphenomena in relation to lyrics.

Several scholars have suggested how rhetorical critics might engage music as a communicative practice.[82] For this project, I derive my methodological posture toward music from the frameworks offered by Robert Fancesconi, as well as Deanna and Timothy Sellnow. In his analysis of Free Jazz and Black Nationalism, Robert Francesconi writes,

> Meaning in instrumental music presumes some familiarity with the stylistic conventions of that music on the part of the listener. A performer may then send messages by juxtaposing familiar and unfamiliar elements. New associations are built in listeners by educating them to the significance of the unfamiliar elements. When such new associations are placed in their extra-musical context, the music can be used for suasory purposes.[83]

A musician's ability to interact with prevailing musical conventions has a rhetorical impact. For example, "Free jazz…sought a jarring confrontation with European musical tradition by playing 'wrong' in that context."[84] Those that subscribe to musical conventions might also work persuasively to sustain or challenge the status quo. Francesconi's method is helpful because it enables me to identify key musical themes within the genre of gangsta rap and suggest how they might operate persuasively in an individual song. For this study, I focus on four conventions of gangsta rap. The *rhythm*, most often manifested in the song's *break*, is perhaps the foundation of any gangsta rap song, helping to create the overall atmosphere of the piece. What Francesconi describes as the "nature of instrumental source" is also vital not only for its contribution to the song's aesthetic but also, at times, its articulation to non-Western cultures. For instance, the presence of African instruments in some jazz and hip-hop songs constitute references to Black Nationalism. Another important element in hip-hop is the *sample*. Gangsta's use of recordings from other musicians' work, many of which are well known to the community, have potentially strong persuasive force by virtue of their reference to other important cultural artifacts.[85] Finally, gangsta makes substantial use of non-musical *sound effects*. Police sirens, the consumption of drugs, the loading and firing of guns, and other sounds associated with criminalized urban life help to constitute an environment for the song that renders it more authentic and credible to its audience.

In their "Illusion of Life" perspective, the Sellnows focus on the interaction between what they call *virtual experience* (lyrics) and *virtual time* (music). They write, "Congruent linguistic and aesthetic symbols reinforce each other, making the didactic message more clear. Incongruent symbols transform the meaning in some way."[86] For instance, the authors juxtapose two popular songs about AIDS—Bruce Springsteen's "Streets of Philadelphia" and Janet Jackson's "Together Again"—and argue that the

former's somber congruency between experience and time made for a more consistent message, as opposed to the latter's ambivalence between tragedy and optimism. The persuasiveness of congruency and incongruency are wholly contingent upon context. Of course, gangsta is heavily dependent on *rapping*, requiring a scholarly attention to lyrics. Assessing the congruency of "experience" and "time" is helpful to make determinations about the song's rhetorical character. For instance, a defining element of gangsta rap is its juxtaposition of violent inner-city scenes with energetic breaks. Such incongruency has an important effect on the song's persuasive force.

Therefore, a reading of gangsta lyrics—informed by the research questions above and a historical materialist reading of fantasy—juxtaposed with a consideration of the generic conventions outlined here will enable me to consider how gangsta contests and enlists fantasies associated with race and criminality in contemporary capitalism. This approach enables me to consider how the rhetoric of gangsta rap interacts with the social relations of contemporary capitalism and how ideological and utopian impulses operate within the genre. Through such an analysis, I will consider how the rhetorical strategies of gangsta rap confront, appropriate, and invite response regarding the mark of criminality and the ways it enables and disables rhetorical and political agency.

Gangsta's visual style

Tricia Rose notes that music videos were central to the early circulation of rap music because it was largely excluded from both mainstream and black radio programming. She adds, "The emergence of rap music video has also opened up a previously nonexistent creative arena for black visual artists."[87] Equally important, Rose suggests, is the role of the rap video in portraying black inner-city life. She writes, "Nothing is more central to rap's music video narratives than situating the rapper in his or

her milieu and among one's crew or posse."[88] The central role of other visual elements such as graffiti, attire, "bling," dance, and sexuality also highlight the genre's intimate relationship to the visual.[89]

In his hugely influential work on subculture, Dick Hebdige argued that style enables subjects to dramatize their relationships to social structures.[90] Barry Brummett suggests that style is also "the grounds in terms of which something is done."[91] In other words, subjects and style interact dialectically in a mutually conditioning and interactive relationship. We enlist style to reckon with everyday life while operating within the very constraints style sets upon us. Style is, of course, a largely visual phenomenon. Rhetoricians have, over the years, begun to engage the role of images in the construction of meaning. For instance, Kevin DeLuca and others have argued that those engaged in social struggle should focus less on traditional modes of movement organizing in favor of producing "image events" designed to startle the populace and create political moments of rupture.[92] Cloud has challenged this position, arguing, "The social, economic, and political contexts…will condition the extent of the Left's influence on an imagistic terrain."[93] Adopting a posture of "iconophilia," Cara Finnegan and Jiyeon Kang advance the argument that rhetorical scholars should be interested in the circulation of images rather than the static image as such. Similarly, Robert Hariman and John Lucaites have noted how iconic photographs like that of the Hindenburg explosion are appropriated throughout American political discourse toward diverse rhetorical ends.[94] Indeed, Hebdige notes that style is a circulatory phenomenon, as different cultures borrow and revise pre-existing discourses.[95] Hip-hop draws heavily upon the sonic, textual, and visual tropes of a long tradition of cultural expression associated with the African Diaspora.

In this project, I adopt a perspective on the visual similar to that of Finnegan and Kang, as well as Hariman and Lucaites. I understand images as circulating through

different material and discursive contexts, remaining contingent in their meaning. Images draw meaning not only from their original enlistments, but also from their articulation to other discourses within any given context. Echoing Cloud's critique of DeLuca, I also articulate images to their material constraints, interrogating how social relations condition the meaning of visual discourses. Gangsta rap is a genre rich in visual rhetorics that have extensive histories. Their contingent meanings are the result not only of gangsta's rich discursive tapestry, but its embeddedness within a dynamic historical moment in which race and criminality operate as sites of symbolic and material struggle.

CHAPTER PREVIEW

This project proceeds in two sections comprising seven chapters. In the first section, I elaborate my theoretical and methodological orientations. The first chapter outlines my materialist posture toward rhetoric and advances *fantasy* as a conceptual category for articulating the relationship between subjectivity, agency, and structure. In order to clarify this perspective, I describe how race and racism function as central fantasies in American culture and politics. In the second chapter, I introduce *the mark of criminality* as a regime of signifiers associated with race and criminality inscribed upon African American subjects. I specifically locate the mark of criminality within the second half of the 20th Century, noting the role of Nixonian politics in deploying a politics of law and order that helped provoke moral panic concerning racialized criminal threats. I trace the enlistment of the mark of criminality through subsequent decades, particularly during the presidency of Ronald Reagan and the coinciding policies of wage deflation and capital flight in predominantly black urban areas. Through this historicization, I reveal how the mark of criminality functions as raw material for constituting fantasies of race and criminality that are themselves embedded within specific material conditions. I

conclude this chapter with the political ascents of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton to the White House, noting how their deployments of the mark of criminality coincided with the *enactment* thereof within the genre of gangsta rap.

Following this description of materialism, fantasy, and the mark of criminality, I turn to the three case studies I describe above. In each chapter, I document how the respective artists enacted the mark of criminality, while also interrogating the ways mainstream rhetors—including media, activists, law enforcement, and political figures—sought to domesticate such enactments and sustain prevailing fantasies of racialized criminality. In other words, each case study chronicles hegemonic struggles of fantasy construction waged with the mark of criminality.

Finally, I conclude the project with a consideration of gangsta rap's legacies within the broader political context of the prison-industrial complex. I posit a conceptual and historical "map" of gangsta rap in order to chart the political possibilities associated with the genre. I argue that although gangsta's capacity for informing concrete political practice is limited, it nonetheless contains a resistant impulse that can inform emancipatory cultural production and anti-prison activism. I ultimately issue a call to scholars and activists to engage the fraught terrain of criminality and culture, seeking both meaning and promise in even the most ambivalent sectors of rhetorical invention.

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[1] "One in 100: Behind Bars in America" 2008.
[2] "Probation and Parole Statistics" 2007.
[3] See Hartnett 2003.
[4] See, for example, Mauer and Chesney-Lind 2002. The Sentencing Project can be found online at http://www.sentencingproject.org. Researchers at this influential non-profit have speculated that if not for the disenfranchisement of many Black voters with felony convictions, Democrat Al Gore would have won the 2000 Florida primary and, with it, the Presidency.
[5] Harris 2007; "One in 100: Behind Bars in America" 2008; Schiraldi and Ziedenberg 2002.

[6] See, for example, the website of the Corrections Corporation of America at http://www.correctionscorp.org. Schlosser 1998. On the relationship between mass incarceration and deterrence, see Mauer 2006. "Criminal Offenders Statistics" 2007.
[7] "One in 100: Behind Bars in America" 2008.
[8] See, for example, Brown, et al. 2003.
[9] Novak 1978.
[10] Quinn 1996, 69.
[11] Watkins 2005, 45.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Quinn 2005, 11.
[14] See Martinez, Martinez, and Chavez 1998.
[15] Perry 2004, 108-9.
[16] Ogbar, 2007.
[17] Phillips 1993.
[18] See Quinn 2005.
[19] Perry 2004, 110.
[20] Mills 1989.
[21] Gates, Jr. 1988. See Perry 2004; Quinn 2005.
[22] Quinn 2005, 139. Also see Marcus 2008.
[23] Quinn 2005, 139.
[24] Forman 2002, xviii.
[25] Ibid, 200.
[26] Watts 2005.
[27] Ibid, 601.
[28] Watts 2001, 198.
[29] Ibid, 197.
[30] See Calhoun 2005; Mickey Hess 2005; Lena 2008; Watts 2005; Yousman 2003.
[31] See, fore example, Ogbar 2007; Perry 2004; Quinn 1996.
[32] For an excellent history of criminality and American politics, see Simon 2007. Also see Currie 1998.
[33] Linebaugh 1992, xxi.
[34] Many scholars of so-called New Social Movements understand political struggle as a battle for recognition. On this debate, see Cloud 2001.
[35] See, for example, Anderson 1995; Brown et al. 2003; Marable, Steinberg, and Middlemass 2007; Reeves and Campbell 1994; Stabile 2006.
[36] Quinn 2005.
[37] See Chang 2005; hooks 1994; Quinn 2005; Watkins 2005.
[38] See, for example, LaGrone 2000; Yousman 2003.
[39] Kelley 1994, 225.
[40] "Education and Correctional Populations" 2003.
[41] See Western, Schiraldi, and Ziedenberg 2003.
[42] PCARE 2007, 407.

[43] See Hartnett and Larson 2006; Hasian, Jr. and Flores 2000; McCann 2007; Picart 2003; Sloop 1996; Stabile 2006; Wood 2003.
[44] Foucault 1997.
[45] Sloop 1996, 3.
[46] Linebaugh 1993, 101.
[47] Hartnett 1998a; Hartnett 2003; Novek 205; PCARE 2007.
[48] Linebaugh 1992.
[49] Rodríguez 2006.
[50] See, for example, Abu-Jamal 1995; Jackson 1994; Peltier 1999.
[51] See, for example, Abu-Jamal 2007.
[52] For an excellent and downright moving discussion of hip-hop's cultural evolution, see George 2004a.
[53] Numerous texts have offered excellent political histories of hip-hop. Two that inform this dissertation are Chang 2005; Watkins 2005.
[54] See, for example, Zinn 1999.
[55] See, for example, Davis 2006; Zinn 1999.
[56] See Burke 1973.
[57] Chang 2005; Dyson 1996; Kelley 1994,183-227; Watkins 2005; West 1999.
[58] See Chang2005; Quinn 2005.
[59] Dyson 1996; Rose 1994; 2008; West 1999b.
[60] Chang 2005, 79.
[61] Chang 2005.
[62] Watkins 2005.
[63] Chang 2005; Watkins 2005.
[64] Chang 2005; Rose 1994.
[65] Chang 2005; Quinn 2005.
[66] For descriptions of historical materialism, see Eagleton 1991; Ebert 1996; Engels 1988, 63; Marx 1988.
[67] On parodic redeployments, see Butler 2006.
[68] Watkins 2005; Chang 2005, 307.
[69] Kelley 1993, 187.
[70] See Chang 2005; Davis 2006; Reeves and Campbell 1994.
[71] Certification information on the Recording Industry Association of America, http://www.riaa.com/goldandplatinumdata.php?resultpage=1&table=SEARCH_RESULTS&action=&title=Straight%20Outta%20Compton&artist=N.W.A&format=&debutLP=&category=&sex=&releaseDate=&requestNo=&type=&level=&label=&company=&certificationDate=&awardDescription=&catalogNo=&aSex=&rec_id=&charField=&gold=&platinum=&multiPlat=&level2=&certDate=&album=&id=&after=&before=&startMonth=1&endMonth=1&startYear=1958&endYear=2007&sort=Artist&perPage=25 (accessed 16 October 2008).
[72] McDermott 2002.
[73] Pareles 1989.

[74] See Chang 2005.
[75] Quinn 2005, 69.
[76] Chang 2005; Quinn 2005.
[77] See, for example, Dyson 2001; Joseph 2006; Keeling 1999; Quinn 2005; Datcher 1996.
[78] Forman 2002, 179.
[79] Cited in Rasmussen 1994,150.
[80] Gunn and Hall 2008b, 144.
[81] Lipsitz 1994, 39.
[82] See Irvine and Kirpatrick 1972, 272-85; Rasmussen 1994; Theodore 2000.
[83] Francesconi 1986, 40.
[84] Ibid, 47.
[85] See Quinn 2005; Miller 2008; Weheliye 2005.
[86] Sellnow and Sellnow 2004, 399.
[87] Rose 1994, 9.
[88] Ibid, 10.
[89] See, for example, George 2004a; Quinn 2005.
[90] Hebdige 1979.
[91] Brummett 2008, 3.
[92] See DeLuca 1999; DeLuca and Peeples 2002.
[93] Cloud 2004, 300.
[94] Hariman and Lucaites 2007.
[95] Hebdige 1979.

SECTION 1

THEORIZING RACE AND CRIMINALITY

Chapter 1: Race, Racism, and the Constitution of an American Fantasy

All in all, race is the modern West's worst idea.

– Richard H. King[1]

The above epigraph is provocative. On one hand, there can be no doubting the litany of injustices performed in the United States in the name of racial demarcation and its accompanying regimes of oppression. Ours is a national identity haunted by the specters of slavery, Jim Crow, and urban neglect. However, to identify race as an idea is to imply an origin. If race is indeed an idea, rather than a transhistorical force, it is necessarily a social construct bound to other social structures. Precisely how race operates within the broad tapestry of history is a cause for sustained debate across disciplines.

Because of race's central role in the history of American public address and social movements, as well as interpersonal and group dynamics, many communication scholars have interrogated the symbolic dimensions of racial identification.[2] For example, Mark McPhail writes, "[Racism is] spoken into being through a system of language which constructs reality in terms of the negative differences, which we collectively assume have existence prior to the generative force of discourse."[3] Celeste Condit and John Lucaites have noted, in their study of the <equality> ideograph, how discourses of racial identity are sites of rhetorical negotiation and struggle.[4] Kirt Wilson argues that black Americans are conditioned by competing discourses, writing, "Black self-consciousness is a hybrid of self-knowledge and social knowledge, influenced by personal perception as well as communal beliefs about race."[5] African Americans, he argues, partake in a kind of dual citizenship with regards to rhetorical constructions of race, living in both a white and black America. Several rhetorical scholars, including Thomas Nakayama, Robert Krizek, Judith Martin, Philip Wander, and Carrie Crenshaw have explored the dimensions of

Whiteness as an invisible site of racial identity and privilege, noting that it "has remained invisible as it continues to influence the identity of those both within and without its domain."[6] Watts has often turned to the Harlem Renaissance to unearth implicit and provocative theories about African American rhetoric and the status of the black voice in American public discourse.[7] As a whole, rhetorical scholars have understood race to be both a product and site of rhetorical invention whose material and cultural impacts on American culture and politics have been nothing short of profound.

I understand race as the sum total of a system of marks that comprise the fantasy of racism. Specifically, race and racism are historical consequences of capitalist development rather than relatively autonomous sites of struggle. It is my claim that gangsta rap intervenes in an already-existing racialized regime of discursive inscriptions I call the mark of criminality toward the end of constructing alternative fantasies associated with black subjectivity. Meanwhile, those who have responded so fervently to the genre have themselves engaged in the discursive work of assembling fantasies that offer alternative visions of race and crime in America, often, but not always, toward the end of sustaining the prison-industrial complex. I understand the mark of criminality as a discursive regime of signifiers associated with black criminality that have come to shape African American subjectivity in the United States. The mark of criminality comprises what Aristotle called inartistic proofs, those rhetorical raw materials associated with race and crime that the rhetor did not create but nonetheless ones that she or he adopts toward the end of invention. It is a tool not of its rhetors own making.[8]

Fantasies are thematically coherent assemblages of inscriptions that enable subjects to articulate their relationship to a totality. Importantly, fantasies do not necessarily denote entirely false renderings of social reality. Rather, to the extent that discourse is at all capable of sufficiently representing a historical and political context—a

salient question I engage below—fantasies may or may not be wholesale distortions of the real. Furthermore, while fantasies are themselves rhetorical, they are also sites of rhetorical struggle.[9] Struggle, in other words, takes place within and between fantasies. Gangsta rap and other counter-hegemonic discourses, then, are in the business of symbolic reversal, or structuring alternative (and not always beneficial) fantasies of race and crime.

In each of my case studies, I approach the texts with the same methodological strategy of identifying hegemonic marks and articulating their role in constructing different fantasies. Each case study demonstrates how discourses about race operate within a totality of social relations associated with American capitalism and the prison-industrial complex. Specifically, the time frame for this dissertation, 1988-1997, represents a period of sustained moral panic associated with racialized criminality. As the 20th Century drew to a close, the fiscal policies of the Regan Administration, as well as the public hysteria provoked by Richard Nixon's "War on Crime" during the late 1960s, had taken a devastating toll on the African American community.[10] Predominantly black urban areas were forced to reckon with significant economic ruin, which led to higher rates of criminal activity, encouraging higher levels of police surveillance and incarceration. All of this sustained and was sustained by hegemonic fantasies of racialized criminality.[11] Thus, it is not only the historical totality of American capitalism and the prison system that contextualize this project, but the specific conditions of policing and incarceration associated with the Reagan, first Bush, and Clinton Administrations which coincided with the birth of gangsta rap.

After documenting what Lloyd Bitzer would call the rhetorical situation associated with race and crime from 1988-1997, I identify the system of marks associated with this totality.[12] In her work on race and gender, Colette Guillaumin writes, "Distinct

from the idea of nature, and even in a sense contrary to it, since it bears witness to the conventional and artificial inscription of social practices, the system of marks has been present for a very long time as the accompaniment of social cleavages."[13] Marks, in other words, denote and sustain hegemonic power relations. Guillaumin notes that systems of marking serve to identify social groups and vary in their degree of relative permanence. She argues that marks associated with race are articulated to permanent phenomena (i.e. skin color) but are themselves the products of historical development. In other words, race is not essentially affixed to skin color. Nonetheless, these marks, once inscribed upon subjects, begin to take on an essential character. They are "presumed to be the intrinsic cause of the place that a group occupies in social relationships."[14] This process of naturalization is, of course, the stuff of rhetorical hegemony.

Yet, marks are not exclusively ideological, in the dominating sense. Rather, they are sites of struggle and may well facilitate rhetorics of resistance. In their influential book *Policing the Crisis*, Stuart Hall and his co-authors comment on the role of racial marks in shaping discursive reality not only for those who might hold and act upon racist views, but also for racialized subjects themselves. They write, "It is through the modality of race that blacks comprehend, handle and begin to resist the exploitation which is an objective feature of their class situation."[15] Race is a primary lens through which racialized subjects come to articulate their relationship to totality. Hall et al. go on to observe how rhetors who stage acts of resistance (or construct alternative fantasies) are nonetheless implicated by and must operate within the system of marks associated with race and racism in contemporary Western society.[16] As I note above, Wilson observes a double consciousness associated with black experience; a hybrid identity that can enable resistance because it may allow the subject to understand that her or his race is a social construction.[17] In other words, both hegemonic and resistant fantasies of racialized

identity operate within the same assemblage of discourses. The fantasies they conjure may be different but draw from the same raw materials.

It is the important observation that all American subjects encounter and must reckon with the marks of race and racism that brings me to the third component of my methodology: noting the disparate and often antagonistic construction of fantasies drawing from the same system of marks. Once a system of marks has effectively "taken on a life of its own," rhetors from any host of subject positions must operate within this symbolic regime. This will, of course, entail the construction of hegemonic fantasies that rationalize current structures of power. It may also produce explicitly resistant fantasies. Far more often, and most relevant to this dissertation, systems of marks will produce ambivalent fantasies. Gangsta rap, I argue, constructs incredibly ambivalent fantasies of racialized criminality that, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, engaged in an epic confrontation with competing fantasies, all of which drew from the regime of inscriptions I have labeled the mark of criminality.

My analysis of gangsta rap will thus follow three key methodological steps. First, I describe how capitalist relations are articulated through racism and the criminal justice system, accounting for the rise of the prison in the United States, its articulation to race, and the emergence of the modern prison-industrial complex. Next, I offer a taxonomy of the inscriptions that comprise the mark of criminality, detailing how discourses of racialized criminality are inscribed upon subjects to such an extent that they become overdetermined. Finally, I lay out the various appropriations and inscriptions of the mark of criminality, ultimately demonstrating how different rhetors use the mark of criminality to construct distinct fantasies. I pursue this final methodological step in the following section, identifying in each case study the deployment of various fantasies associated with race and the criminal justice system. In the remainder of this chapter, I outline my

understanding of fantasy as framework for rhetorical criticism and describe my materialist posture toward racial markers. First, however, I define a materialist mode of ideology critique.

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND THE CRITIQUE OF IDEOLOGY

Central to this dissertation is the claim that gangsta rap operates within a broader historical context of mass incarceration, racial oppression, and economic exploitation which both enables and constrains rhetorical invention while remaining itself subject to the conditioning role of cultural production. The theoretical tradition of historical materialism is particularly helpful in understanding how rhetoric and culture interact with the structural relations that comprise contemporary capitalism. I situate my critique of gangsta rap within the phenomenon's relationship to those very structures. I intend to articulate gangsta's relationship to a totality and examine the ways it leads subjects to understand their own relationships to structure. Texts can enable counter-hegemonic resistance or reify dominant ideologies. However, I believe all texts contain, even in muted form, an impulse toward alternative ways of being.

The term "materialism" is problematic for rhetorical studies. While rhetorical scholars like Ronald Greene have advanced a "new materialist rhetoric" in which so-called "communicative labor" enables rhetors to constitute new ways of being outside of capital, I am more aligned with the version of materialism advocated by Dana Cloud, Celeste Condit, and other rhetorical scholars who believe that the political character of materiality preexists discursive constitution.[18] Under such a conceptualization, materialist criticism observes a dynamic relationship between the text and the social structures that contextualize it, investigating the text's relationship to identity, struggle, and production. Such a view of materialism imagines rhetoric as largely instrumental in its role of shaping

consciousness and identification. Although I believe rhetoric serves a constitutive (i.e. calling a common, collective identity into being) function, it is nonetheless essential to reckon with the role of material structures in the constitutive process.[19] In other words, rhetoric no doubt locates subjects within specific symbolic relations (e.g. class, nationality, race, gender), but does so in the context of *material* relations associated with the specific ways capitalism organizes bodies.[20] I critique the genre as a rhetorical intervention embedded within the antagonistic terrain of race, crime, and class and ask how it might facilitate consciousness and struggle against exploitative and oppressive social arrangements.[21] To clarify how materialist theory might enable the kind of critique that engages the enabling and constraining impact of materiality on rhetorical invention, I first discuss the work of Karl Marx, then Antonio Gramsci's writing on hegemony, before finally addressing Fredric Jameson's writings on materialist criticism in postmodernity.

Karl Marx's materialism

Karl Marx, in his lengthy studies of early capitalist development in Europe, identified an antagonistic relationship at the heart of the emerging system of production. He argued that an economic system driven by the accumulation of capital and the generation of profit necessitated a source of value. This source, Marx concluded, was the labor of working people. He noted that employers required workers to produce value above and beyond that necessary to reproduce their labor power (i.e. sustain their own lives), retaining that *surplus value* as profit to be reinvested in the production process.[22] Marx called this phenomenon *exploitation* and advocated nothing less than the overthrow of capitalism by a radicalized and organized working class as a corrective. He also noted a contradiction within capitalist production: the very class capitalists needed to sustain

production and create value was the same one with the ability and interest in overthrowing them. As Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels famously wrote, capitalism had produced in the working class its own gravediggers.[23]

Although many critics of Marxism have argued that Marx posited a deterministic model of capitalism's revolutionary overthrow, he by no means felt such dramatic change was inevitable.[24] Although the *Communist Manifesto* includes language that might lead to such a conclusion, the document's very existence (it was originally intended as a political pamphlet of the Working Men's International Association) highlights Marx and Engels's own recognition of the need for rhetoric and agitation in their political project.[25] Furthermore, although neither Marx nor Engels was a rhetorician, together they theorized the role of ideology in mystifying the antagonistic class relations that underlie capitalist production. In the *German Ideology*, Marx observed how "every dominant relationship was pronounced a religious relationship and transformed into a cult, a cult of law, a cult of the State, etc."[26] For Marx, capitalism needed a way to rationalize the perpetuation of a system requiring working people to arise each morning, sell their labor for the production of goods they could not immediately consume so that others might profit, and live their lives well aware that their livelihood may diminish or entirely disappear depending on the whims of the market. Ideology, argued Marx, made such rationalization possible. In order to clarify how ideology operates within capitalism, I now turn to hegemony theory and critical cultural studies.

Materialism, culture, and hegemony

Perhaps the most familiar and maligned concept related to a materialist critique of culture is the distinction between the economic *base* and the cultural *superstructure*. The claim that, in Engels's words, "The production of the means to support human life [the

base] and, next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure [the superstructure]" has provided those who dismiss historical materialism as reductionist and deterministic with ample ammunition to support such an attitude.[27] Engels later qualified his argument:

> According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure…also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*.[28]

In other words, Engels did not believe that culture was mere superstructural clay in the hands of an economic base. Although material conditions give rise to the very conditions of possibility for cultural production, they are no doubt subject to the influence of culture and rhetoric on the ways humans relate to their environment. Thus, while gangsta rap may have emerged originally from the material conditions of the inner city, it is also a rhetorical force that has significant impacts on racial politics in America.[29]

A number of thinkers rooted in critical and cultural studies have suggested that individuals are relatively powerless to reckon with the force of culture. Louis Althusser influentially argued that *ideological state apparatuses* interpolated subjects. He envisioned capitalism as a machine-like totality in which "Each mass ejected *en route* is practically provided with the ideology which suits the role it has to fulfill in class society."[30] Althusser saw dominant structures as all encompassing and, seemingly, insurmountable. Although somewhat more optimistic about the overall prospects for resistance, members of the Frankfurt School, most notably Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, envisioned a *Culture Industry* that produced culture and subordinated it to

the will of capital.[31] For such thinkers, culture *works upon the subject* and places profound, even insurmountable constraints on agency.

Other than Louis Althusser, the most influential author to theorize how ideologies operate within public consciousness is Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci.[32] Writing while incarcerated under fascist rule, Gramsci emphasized the role of culture in justifying antagonistic social relations and the subsequent *hegemonic struggle* between competing class-based "blocs" for power. The primary value of Gramsci's writing on hegemony is its attention to the role of rhetoric and culture in sustaining and challenging social structures. Gramsci, writes, "The superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of modern warfare."[33] Culture, for Gramsci, is a site of conflict in which the working class must strategically position itself. Accordingly, a class requires its own intellectuals to "give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields."[34] This, for Gramsci, is important precisely because those interested in sustaining the status quo engage in their own form of trench warfare—with far more sophisticated weapons—in order to maintain their hegemonic status. The role of the organic intellectual is the constitution of subject-positions that enable oppressed and exploited people to challenge regimes of power that do not represent their interests.

Although Gramsci theorized class struggle, many thinkers have adopted his writing to problematize historical materialism's so-called "class reductionism." Because Gramsci offered a coherent theory of culture, they found in his writings an appealing theory of social struggle that embraced race, gender, nation, and other cultural variables that materialists had allegedly excluded.[35] The belief that historical materialism is solely concerned with economic struggle and the dictatorship of the proletariat as history's transcendental subject remains to this day.[36] For instance, Greene claims that writers like

Cloud view class as a rhetorical construct that *simplifies* social struggle amid the cacophony of subjectivities that permeate contemporary capitalism.[37] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe similarly write, "The discursive character of every subject position" precludes "the notion of subject as an originative and founding totality."[38] Accordingly, materialism's attempts to organize social struggle within the construct of class ignore the contingency of the true moment of politics: discursive constitution. Several scholars of race, gender, and other sites of identity have dismissed historical materialism as an outmoded method that relegates important subjectivities to the dustbin of epiphenomenal sites of struggle.[39]

Gramsci, by his own words, believed that ordinary people should organize along the lines of shared interests based on their mutual relationships to social structures. Yet, it is impossible to deny that individuals within modern capitalism are fragmented, occupying numerous and contradictory subject positions that complicate the kind of class-based cohesion Gramsci and other Marxists have historically envisioned. Furthermore, historian E.P. Thompson documented how working people come to identify less and less with any notion of class belonging.[40] Class-consciousness, itself, is a rhetorical construct that Marxists have argued best articulates the shared interests of working people regardless of race, nationality, gender, etc. The question, then, for the materialist critic, is how one might recognize the fragmented nature of subjectivity and embrace the salience of subjectivities other than class, while remaining committed to a critique of the structures that condition the lives of all working people. How for example, might one account for the specificity of poor and working class African American urban life while appreciating its relationship to social structures that implicate *all* subjects? One way of understanding these relationships comes from the work of critical theorist Fredric Jameson.

Cognitive mapping and utopia

Two important concepts associated with the work of Fredric Jameson inform this project. The first is his method of *cognitive mapping*. Jameson is perhaps best known for his critique of postmodernism, seeing the fragmentation of culture and subjectivity as a symptom of modern (or "late") capitalism. The market, he argued, had grown so vast, that it had effectively decimated any hopes of authenticity or coherence. Cognitive mapping emerged as a means for the critic to "enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole."[41] The cognitive map charts the distance between the subject and the broader regime of relations that condition her or his subjectivity. For example, a cognitive map of the terrain known as "gangsta" recognizes the fragmentation of young black inner-city subjectivity while highlighting its historical and structural connection to "the ensemble of society's structures as a whole."

A cognitive map might also highlight alternative social relations by way of intersecting trajectories along its surface. Although a young, unemployed African American male who listens to gangsta rap may appear worlds apart from a white woman working in the service sector economy (who, as a woman, might rightfully resent gangsta rap's often misogynistic lyrics), they might still share common inroads toward the social structures that condition their everyday lives.[42] Therein lies the condition of possibility for common cause and identification. Jameson's concept is valuable because it both recognizes the fragmentation of the subject and the importance of a notion of totality by which the critic might ground and contextualize critique. It also reveals how material relations can illuminate possibilities for new symbolic relations.

Another valuable contribution of Fredric Jameson is his emphasis on *utopia*. Traditional ideological criticism is primarily interested in how, as literary critic Terry

Eagleton writes, "[P]eople may come to invest in their own unhappiness."[43] The chief role of ideology is to convince subjects to subscribe to symbolic regimes and social structures that do not represent their interests. Yet, ideology rarely works upon "unwitting" masses without resistance. As cultural studies scholar Raymond Williams writes, "The hegemonic has to be seen as more than the simple transmission of an (unchanging) dominance. On the contrary, any hegemonic process must be especially alert and responsive to the alternatives and opposition which question or threaten its dominance."[44] Hegemonic struggle is a give-and-take process between opposing forces operating on a contingent social plane. In short, embedded within the very meaning of texts are both the mystification of dominant ideology and the desires—no matter how muted—of exploited and oppressed peoples who might benefit from alternative systems of meaning and ways of being.

Jameson offers valuable tools for reckoning with this tension between the dominant and the resistant residing within the cultural text. It is important to distinguish Jameson's concept of utopia from those abstract worlds of high-minded fantasy that find little resonance with social conditions and few avenues for concrete political practice.[45] Rather, a utopian gesture, writes Jameson, should represent an "effort to debate alternate forms of social life."[46] Marx's own theories of working class consciousness and the prospects for a post-capitalist society were grounded in his observations of the very social structures that exploited workers. By identifying the central role of workers in capitalist production, he theorized not only their exploitation, but the cooperative relations at the heart of production that portended their ability to halt production and run society on their own terms.[47] The ability to recognize both the devastation of the status quo and the possibilities of alternatives embedded within the same social system is key to materialist rhetorical critique.

But what does utopia mean for rhetorical criticism? Adopting Walter Benjamin's claim that all documents of civilization are simultaneously documents of barbarism, Jameson writes, "The effectively ideological is also, at the same time, necessarily Utopian."[48] Just as Marx saw within the cold machinery of production the potential for a new world, Jameson equally recognizes within the ideological text a revolutionary impulse toward utopia. To explain this in more detail, I cite Jameson at length:

> The prior moment of class consciousness is that of the oppressed classes (whose structural identity—whether a peasantry, slaves, serfs, or a genuine proletariat—evidently derives from the mode of production). On such a view, those who must work and produce surplus value for others will necessarily grasp their own solidarity – initially, in the unarticulated form of rage, helplessness, victimization, oppression by a common enemy—*before* the dominant or ruling class has any particular incentive for doing so. Indeed, it is the first glimpse of such sullen resistance, and the sense of the nascent political dangers of such potential unification of the laboring population, which generates the mirror image of class solidarity among the ruling groups (or the possessors of the means of production).[49]

He continues,

> This suggests…that the index of all class consciousness is to bound not in [the ruling class's] "contents" or ideological motifs, but first and foremost in the dawning sense of solidarity with other members of a particular group or class, whether the latter happen to be your fellow landowners, those who enjoy structural privileges linked to your own, or, on the contrary, fellow workers and producers, slaves, serfs, or peasants.[50]

Like Williams, Jameson notes that the founding impulse of ruling ideology is the desire to contain the potential unruliness and solidarity of ordinary people. *Ideology presupposes resistance*. Michel de Certeau draws similar conclusions in his critical historiography. He claims that all historical writing is in the business of producing *fictions*, arguing that the hegemonic historical text represses resistant elements by virtue of exclusion, but can never entirely eliminate it. Rather, the resistant remains as a residue or remainder. A criticism committed to uncovering the utopian within the ideological—or

what de Certeau might describe as making that which is deemed "unthinkable" once again "thinkable"—recognizes that ideology effectively creates its own gravediggers by enlisting consciousness toward the end of subordination.[51] Such a perspective enables the critic and rhetor to isolate such consciousness and articulate it to an alternative rendering of social reality that might enable coherent and viable challenges to the status quo.

Such a perspective is similar to that of rhetoricians Kent Ono and John Sloop. They write, "It is our stance…that the critic is not only committed to *telos by necessity*, but that the critic should take hold of the threads of that *telos*—a *telos* that is simultaneously and admittedly contingent—and commit to a purpose."[52] Later, they argue, "Unless one agrees to establish a contingent utopia, one cannot argue in a process toward a goal; one can only argue against a domination."[53] The critic, for Ono and Sloop, cannot merely deconstruct the oppressive present, but must also partake in *imagining a utopian future*. In this dissertation, I imagine a *materialist telos* motivated by the possibilities embedded within the dialectic between the social and symbolic structures that organize life in contemporary capitalism. In other words, the utopia that motivates the critic should be sought both within the text and its larger social context.

Much as Marx theorized the end of capitalism by observing the everyday struggles of working people, my critique of gangsta rap will interrogate the resistant possibilities embedded therein by viewing representative texts in relation to what a disproportionately policed and incarcerated people are fighting for and what they are fighting against. It is my claim that gangsta rap represents a potent, if degraded, utopian response to ideologies of race and crime. Cornel West suggests nothing less about the tradition of African American music in general, writing,

> The vitality and vigor of Afro-American popular music depends not only on the talents of Afro-American musicians, but also on the moral visions, social analyses

> and political strategies that highlight personal dignity, provide political promise and give existential hope to the underclass and poor working class in Afro-America.[54]

In other words, a utopian *telos* lies at the very core of the African American musical tradition. It is born of struggle and conditioned by visions of a better world.

Gangsta rap is connected to a host of social forces. It was born of urban ruin instigated by capital flight and mass incarceration. It is one of many voices emerging from a poor and working class African American community devastated by specific policy choices that have dealt devastating dividends to ordinary people.[55] Although gangsta rap is the product of oppression and exploitation, resistance from the black community also constitutes it. Both the ideological and the utopian are at work in this controversial genre. While gangsta rap is often complicit in reifying misogynistic, violent, and materialistic ideologies, it also contains vibrant elements of social critique and resistance. Through a cognitive mapping of the genre *vis-à-vis* the criminal justice system, it is possible to highlight gangsta's relationship to broader social structures while also interrogating the ideological limits and utopian possibilities of the music, as well as the rhetoric of those reckoning with the genre's place in American society. In order to clarify how subjects partake in such reckoning, I now turn to the concept of fantasy.

FANTASY AS AN ANALYTICAL CATEGORY

Two analytic tools drive my analysis in this project: fantasies and marks. I understand *fantasies* as coherent assemblages of discursive *marks*, which articulate subjects' relationship to a totality. Though my understanding of fantasy draws heavily from the vocabulary of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, there are significant differences between my understanding of fantasy and Lacan's. Where I understand fantasies as expressions of structural relations, Lacan imagined them as articulations of a desire for wholeness. Subjects, for Lacanians, yearn for the "Real" which exists outside of

language, making it ineffable and inaccessible.[56] The notion of totality that drives my project is nothing less than the sum total of capitalist relations in contemporary society. These vast relations, as Jameson has argued, escape an entirely faithful representation through rhetoric.[57] Furthermore, I understand the sprawling material and cultural apparatus of crime and punishment as a totality within capitalism. As I note in my introduction, the American prison-industrial complex is a behemoth that produces subjectivities and traumas for an ever-growing number of citizens. Below I describe my understanding of fantasy and its relationship to rhetorical studies.

Ernest Bormann first introduced rhetorical scholars to fantasy in a 1972 article arguing that recent findings about the production of fantasies in small group settings provided a framework for identifying them in public address. Advancing Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) as his conceptual framework, Bormann claimed his theory accounted "for the development of rhetorical visions, a common symbolic ground among the sharers of the vision, and the creation, raising, and sustaining of a group or community's consciousness."[58] According to Bormann, this consciousness is created, raised, and sustained through the constitution of a *rhetorical vision* by way of *fantasy themes*. Rhetorical visions are those "composite dramas which catch up large groups of people in a symbolic reality."[59] According to John Cragan and Donald Shields, fantasy themes "[function] to present a common experience and shape that experience rhetorically into symbolic knowledge."[60] They emerge and "chain out" both in interpersonal groups dynamics (i.e. small groups, organizations), as well as via rhetorical invention.

Bormann's approach to fantasy, while original and productive, was also naïve. He claims, "Just as an individual's repressed problems might surface in dream fantasies so those of a group might surface in a fantasy chain and a critic might interpret the manifest

content with an eye to discovering the group's hidden agenda."[61] Interrogating a group's fantasies, says Bormann, is a mechanism for rendering their desires and motives transparent. Writing with Cragan and Shields, Bormann claims, "Rhetorical fantasies are not deceptive; they are discoverable through fantasy theme analysis."[62] The notion that subjectivity might be wholly represented through fantasies or any other discursive apparatus is problematic. A host of poststructuralist theories—arguably the entire project of post-Enlightenment philosophy—renders the notion of a centered subject untenable.[63] As Gunn laments, "How different fantasy theme analysis might have been were fantasies presumed to be motivated by social structures or desires that were unknown to those who experienced catharsis…in a rhetorical vision."[64] Thus, while the fantasy provides a valuable starting point for understanding how subjects articulate their relationships to social reality, such analysis requires a more refined understanding of fantasy than Bormann is capable of providing.

Jacques Lacan believed that desire is driven by a quest for wholeness. This quest operates within the realm of human interaction and, therefore, communication. He argues that true identification with the Other—what Gunn calls the fantasy of communication—is impossible.[65] Rather, our moment of primary identification—what he calls the *mirror stage*—is the point at which we recognize our own image and then proceed to adopt that image (the *Ideal-I*) as our basis for identification with others. The result, argues Lacan, is a double alienation, as the *Ideal-I* cannot ever represent one's true sense of self. I do not know myself, but only an image of myself. Similarly, I can never know others, just images thereof. In other words, we long for the Real—a space outside of images and symbols—but can only reckon with our world with those very tools.[66] Fantasies are those symbolic arrangements that promise wholeness. They partake in what Gunn has called

the "gesture of something more"; they promise, but never truly deliver, that which lies beyond the constitutive limit of the fantasy.[67]

The constitutive limit of fantasy is the Real. The Real, for Lacan, is the gap in the Symbolic. It is the impossible limit that the subject works toward but never achieves. The subject always senses the Real but never accesses it. An encounter with the Real represents a traumatic moment when the limits of representation have been met. Such trauma provokes a reconfiguration within the Symbolic. In other words, trauma demands rhetorical invention. A simple example would be that moment of utter confusion following a car accident; that moment of impact where all involved have yet to make coherent sense of what just happened. That process of sense making is the (re)construction of fantasies. Authors ranging from Slavoj Žižek to Barbara Biesecker have documented the ways the collective trauma of the 9-11 attacks in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania, constituted a symbolic rupture in the American imaginary.[68] The result, rather than a productive reckoning with the nature of the attacks and the place of America in the world—what Freud called *mourning*—was a rehabilitation of imperialist hegemony through the deployment of fantasies associated with an always already looming terrorist threat.[69] A populace forced to reckon with its place in geopolitics was promptly and problematically domesticated within a hegemonic fantasy of nationalism and war.

My approach to fantasy differs from that of Lacan to the extent that I do not locate the *real* outside of social relations. Although exploitation and oppression are justified through rhetorical invention, they act upon the sensual body in ways that call for rhetoric but preexist it nonetheless.[70] Cloud distinguishes an *experiential* real from the Lacanian Real as one "in which knowledge of the material base of oppression *contra* mystification generates critical insight and the capacity for action."[71] She adds that this real is "the

basis not of *automatic* consciousness, *spontaneous* action, or *transparent* purpose, but rather of consciousness and willed action produced in the dialectical interaction between shared experience and interpretation of that experience."[72] Access to the experiential real, like the Lacanian Real, is still somewhat elusive. The basis for judgment and political practice emerges from the relationship between the rhetorical and sensual dimensions of social being—or solidarity with similarly-situated subjects.

The work of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge offers a helpful analysis of how fantasies can function as faithful sites of structural critique—or engagements of the real.[73] Using labor struggles as their site of analysis, they write, "The unbearable real situation experienced by the worker leads to the creation of a defense mechanism that shields the ego from the shock effects of an alienated reality."[74] They argue, "Fantasy constitutes an unconscious practical critique of alienation."[75] Because fantasy is the mediator between a subject and her or his relationship to the cold structures of exploitation and oppression, it retains an element of resistance (what Jameson would call a utopian impulse) if for no other reason than it mediates a relation that would otherwise be unacceptable and unsustainable. Because of this central characteristic, fantasy expresses, even in obscured and problematic forms, the grievances of an oppressed and exploited people.

Jameson writes, "The works of mass culture…cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a *fantasy bribe* to the public about to be so manipulated."[76] Popular sports teams, for instance, are successful in persuading fans to identify with their organizations in a way that displaces material antagonisms precisely because it successfully appeals to and gives expression to the anxieties of life in modern capitalism. Although consuming unhealthy food and alcohol, or cheering on well-paid professional athletes may not hasten a people to recognize their political agency, it nonetheless provides them a site to express what Jameson calls "the ineradicable drive

towards collectivity" at the heart of utopian desire.[77] In his excellent body of work regarding resistance and sports culture, Dave Zirin has observed that although athletics generally mimic nationalist discourses, figures such as Muhammad Ali, Roberto Clemente, as well as Tommie Smith and John Carlos (who famously raised their fists in protest while receiving medals at the 1968 Summer Olympics) are testaments to the resistant potential residing within the structures of competition and spectacle.[78] Jameson argues, "genuine social and historical content must first be tapped and given some initial expression if it is subsequently to be the object of successful manipulation and containment."[79] If people enjoyed their relationship to capital, they would not require such fantasy. Indeed, fantasy can "constitute the raw material and the medium for the expansion of the consciousness industry."[80] It can condition subjects to invest in their own unhappiness.[81] Yet, such conditioning is premised on the subject's desire to do away with that unhappiness. Therein lies fantasy's resistant potential.

For Jameson, the real, understood here as the actuality of social and economic relations, is representable only through discourse and, thus, our cognitive grasp thereof will always be incomplete.[82] However, while our capacity to articulate and rationally engage the real relies on rhetoric, our experiential relationship to it is sensual. Negt and Kluge write, "The masses live with experiences of violence, oppression, exploitation, and in the broader sense of the term, alienation. They possess material, sensual evidence of the restriction of possibilities in their lives, of their freedom of movement."[83] These embodied moments provide a basis for judgment of fantasies. Negt and Kluge add, "All escapist forms of fantasy production tend, once they have reached a certain distance from reality, to turn around and face up to real situations."[84]

The moment these fantasies "turn around" is when they cease to be sufficient articulations of the real, resulting in, to borrow Lacan's language, traumatic encounters

with social reality. It is, to extend the above metaphor, the moment of impact between two vehicles. This bankruptcy becomes apparent through collective experience and moments of crisis. Marx and Engels argued in the *Communist Manifesto* and elsewhere that capitalism's tendency toward crisis is essential to fostering resistance from the working class—in other words, it enables the construction of new fantasies.[85] Negt and Kluge claim that the physical "massing together" of subjects enables them to juxtapose their individual fantasies and recognize resonant commonalities that create the conditions of possibility for collective action.[86] Therefore, not all constitutive discourses misdiagnose or misname the real. Although rhetoric will never perfectly and entirely represent social relations, some fantasies better serve the interests of social justice than others.

This view is similar to rhetorical pragmatist Stephen Mailloux's position that "not every politics needs a grand narrative or requires an essentialist history of humanity."[87] The fact that no single fantasy will provide a perfectly transparent representation of the real should not be cause for political paralysis. However, a politics nonetheless requires a basis for judgment and action. It is my position that the interaction between a fantasy and its material context provides that basis. For Negt and Kluge, it is subjects' *shared relationship to a totality* that enables them to collectively assemble their fantasies and partake in counter-hegemonic practices. Such a position is certainly pragmatic, but also materialist.

However, the prevailing fantasy itself must also encounter some sort of crisis, rupture, or trauma that requires reconfiguration. Writing on trauma, Jameson argues,

> This process [of trauma] has its equivalent in the political realm, in the realm of ideologies, where a conjuncture (and at the outer limit a polarizing, revolutionary situation) causes the (usually liberal) ideological system of defenses to crumble and confronts us with anxiety of choice and commitment… and just as the analyst

> can describe [the Real] abstractly (or "scientifically"), so can the historian or political analyst, provided it is understood that there is a vast gap between that conceptual or abstract shorthand and the *experience* of the process itself.[88]

Moments of political and economic crisis create opportunities to reassess dominant narratives and intervene with alternative variations on fantastical structures. It is thus the combination of similarly situated subjects responding to a moment of material and/or symbolic rupture that creates the condition of possibility for the kinds of rhetorical invention that can alter prevailing fantasies and, perhaps, offer more politically beneficial courses of action and ways of being. In other words, crisis can either produce counterhegemonic fantasies or rehabilitate the status quo through the recuperation and readjustment of dominant fantasies. The fantasy of the moral panic associated with black criminality from 1988 to 1996 is that of racism, to which I now turn.

THE STRUCTURE AND NATURE OF RACIST FANTASY

Much contemporary race theory is premised on a refutation of a materialist analysis of oppression and exploitation under capitalism. For example, Cornel West writes, "The time has passed when the so-called race question, or Negro question, can be relegated to secondary or tertiary *theoretical* significance in bourgeois or Marxist discourses."[89] In his influential book *Black Marxism*, Cedric Robinson argues, "Marxism is a Western construction—a conceptualization of human affairs and historical development that is emergent from the historical experiences of European peoples mediated, in turn, through their civilization, their social orders, and their cultures."[90] Linda Alcoff warns against a "class reductionism that sidelines other kinds of struggles and homogenizes class interests."[91] Thinkers like West, Robinson, and Alcoff claim that the experiences of racial minorities contain far more complexity than materialist thinking is capable of understanding. This critique stems from a belief that historical materialism

renders all sites of struggle not explicitly articulated to class—whether they be race, gender, sexuality, or others—epiphenomenal.[92]

I agree with literary scholar Gregory Meyerson that much of modern race theory's abandonment of the materialist tradition hinges on a mischaracterization thereof.[93] The materialism I advance in this project recognizes a vast array of subjectivities associated with life in the world as we find it. As my description of cognitive mapping suggests, subjectivity and totality are not mutually exclusive sites of analysis. Rather, they function dialectically with one another. The task of my critical project is to locate the subject within numerous, often contradictory, subject-positions and articulate how those subjectivities meet at a common point of departure: capitalist relations. Such a gesture is less reductionist than interested in contextualizing sites of identity ranging from race to gender, religion to nationality. Race and racism operate in and are justified to sustain capitalism.

But how does race operate as a discursive regime of power? Alcoff writes, "Inherent to the concept of race is the idea that it exists there on the body itself, not simply on its ornaments or in its behaviors."[94] Guillaumin offers the following definition:

> Racism is a specific symbolic system operating inside the system of power relations of a particular type of society. It is a signifying system whose key characteristic is the irreversibility which it confers on a society's reading of reality, the crystallization of social actors and their practices into essences.[95]

Race, in other words, is a social construction that, as McPhail and Wilson also note, shapes social knowledge.[96] Modern science has dispensed with the belief that race functions as any sort of biological essence.[97] Rather, it is entirely discursive. Despite the rhetorical, and therefore contingent, character of race and racism, they persist with profound and devastating material consequences.

The question of *why* race persists as a hegemonic mark in modern society is a matter of significant controversy. Scholars in the critical race tradition often note the "specificity" of African American oppression, suggesting that it has a relative degree of *autonomy* from other sites of oppression.[98] Race, for such theorists, operates as a *floating signifier* that no doubt intersects with other sites of subjectivity like gender and class, but retains its own autonomy.[99] This central theoretical claim carries with it a number of significant but problematic political entailments. For example, scholars such as Robinson and C.L.R. James have privileged Black Nationalist struggles that they claim simply cannot be grasped by brittle and allegedly Eurocentric modes of Marxist thinking.[100] Because race is relatively autonomous from class, such scholars argue that these forms of resistance must be considered apart from what they understand to be materialism's preoccupation with traditional modes of labor organization and social movements. Yet, my project is largely premised on the belief that even the most autonomous sites of struggle—racial or otherwise—can and must be articulated to a broader project of systemic critique.

Understanding race as an autonomous floating signifier also suggests that it is relatively permanent. Derrick Bell, for instance, writes, "Slavery is, as an example of what white America has done, a constant reminder of what white America might do," adding that "*Black people will never gain full equality in this country*."[101] McPhail also laments, "[I believe] that there is little that African Americans or other people of color can do to convince people of European descent to collectively call into question the power and privileges they enjoy in the present that are embedded in the racial past."[102] This power and privilege McPhail speaks of are most clearly articulated in the *corpus* of Whiteness Studies, which is arguably the most predominant theoretical perspective regarding race in rhetorical studies. Whiteness scholars advance the important claim that

whiteness constitutes and *invisible center* of American racial relations. As a result, all other races are marked *to the extent that they are not white*. This invisibility has hastened a "new racism" that functions on the premise that institutional racism and, therefore, the need to acknowledge racial differentiation, has disappeared from the stage of history.[103] This is problematic because, as Whiteness scholars note, contemporary racist discourses operate within the invisible center of whiteness. Wander, Martin, and Nakayama add,

> Attacks on affirmative action, for example, are largely premised upon the argument of race-blind merit. In many ways, these attacks are motivated by a concern over the limited spaces available to white applicants and a desire to increase opportunities for white people, yet they are masked in a *rhetoric of innocence*.[104]

Scholars such as David Roediger and Richard Dyer have also advanced a theoretical engagement of whiteness as an unmarked discursive site of privilege. Dyer writes, "As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just human."[105] Race, for Dyer, is a signifier inscribed upon the bodies of racialized Others while white subjects maintain and enjoy a privileged stature. Anti-racist action, under such a conceptualization, becomes an ethical posture rather than a materially based gesture of solidarity.[106]

While I agree that race is discursively constituted and marks subjects in ways that profoundly impact their lives and often necessitate distinct strategies of resistance, I believe race and racism are intimately affixed to a multifarious network of relations and not an autonomous site of struggle. To make such an observation is not to *reduce* or *render less significant* race and anti-racist struggle, but to assume a strategic critical posture toward understanding how both operate within the intricacies of oppression and exploitation and how such an analysis might advance the cause of social justice.

Accordingly, I understand race as the system of marks that have traditionally been enlisted to constitute racist fantasies in the United States.

Racism and the fantasies of capitalism

In her provocative Lacanian analysis of race and racism, Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks argues, "Race is a regime of visibility that secures our investment in racial identity."[107] This investment, she argues, is driven by a desire for wholeness. More specifically, she writes, "The signifier Whiteness tries to fill the constitutive lack of the sexed subject. It promises totality, an overcoming of difference itself."[108] Whiteness, she claims, is the "master signifier" of race and "offers the illegal enjoyment of absolute wholeness."[109] While I fully intend to retain my use of a materialist, rather than Lacanian, understanding of fantasy, Seshadri-Crooks's psychoanalytic vocabulary is a helpful point of departure for describing the role of race and racism in American capitalism. Specifically, if fantasy represents a system of marks assembled to articulate subjects' relationship to totality, the discourses of white supremacy and black criminality that came to codify social relations in American capitalism undoubtedly constitute fantasies themselves.

As capitalism began to emerge in 17th Century Europe, the social landscape began to change dramatically—even traumatically. This period of sustained social upheaval required new fantasies to reckon with a transforming totality. Race and racism played active roles in structuring them. Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker expertly document the numerous ways capital sought to subordinate resistance in what they call the "Revolutionary Atlantic" during the 17th and 18th Centuries. They note that the emergence of capitalist economies in Europe was accompanied by a broad trajectory of resistant strategies, ranging "from mutinies and strikes to riots and insurrections and

revolution."[110] As capitalists increasingly required the labor power of working subjects, those subjects fought back.[111] Linebaugh and Rediker imagined these multifarious sites of resistance as a "many-headed hydra" to denote its multifaceted yet common relationship to the totality of capital. Capital required various strategies to combat this "hydra." For instance, they argue that witchcraft trials in seventeenth century Europe intervened in a "crisis of reproduction" and "sought to rationalize social reproduction in a capitalist context—that is, as the breeding of labor power."[112] Linebaugh and Rediker also note how discourses of racism emerged to morally justify slavery to God-fearing colonists in Barbados or undermine Irish/Haitian solidarity during the Haitian Revolution.[113] In both instances, we see two disparate fantasies, male supremacy and white supremacy, intervening to rationalize social arrangements that might otherwise be met with unified resistance. Although such oppressions no doubt entail dramatically different life experiences for those who must sustain them, they remain articulated to the same totality. Oppression is, in other words, an ideological strategy and racism a fantasy comprising a system of markings inscribed upon the body.

The origins of American racism are in the emergence of the slave economy in early colonial capitalism. As the southern economies became increasingly reliant on black slave labor, it was necessary to rhetorically justify such an inhumane arrangement of servitude. Discourses of racism effectively dehumanized Africans and made their enslavement seem natural.[114] Yet, historian Barbara Fields laments, "Probably a majority of American historians think of slavery in the United States as primarily a system of race relations—as though the chief business of slavery were the production of white supremacy rather than the production of cotton, sugar, rice and tobacco."[115] Guillaumin documents how a litany of junk science and other theoretical frameworks *followed* the advent of slavery as a mode of capitalist production. She writes, "[The] morphological

'mark' does not precede the social relationship, any more than branding or the tattooing of a number [in a concentration camp] do."[116] She continues:

> But in fact the process of the appropriation of slaves had already been going on for around a century when the first taxonomies that included somatic characteristics appeared: the mark *followed* slavery and in no way preceded the slave grouping. The slave system was already constituted when the inventing of the races was thought up."[117]

Eric Williams similarly contends, "The reason [for slavery in America] was economic; not racial; it had to do not with the color of the laborer, but the cheapness of the labor. As compared with Indian and white labor, Negro slavery was eminently superior."[118] Racial markers functioned as rationalizations for an emerging and preexisting mode of labor exploitation.

This is not to suggest that the emergence of racist ideology was the vast conspiratorial work of white colonial patriarchs in dimly-lit rooms, but rather that the cultural production of ideology roughly corresponds with and functions to justify shifts in material relations. While racism in America has taken on a life of its own and has profound and devastating material impacts on its subjects, we can nonetheless trace its origins to the need to justify new material arrangements; the need to circumvent the prospect of interracial solidarity and, for at least a time, abolitionist politics. As American subjects—both free and enslaved, working class and capitalist—came to reckon with changing social arrangements, the fantasy of black subordination proved an effective, devastating, and fiercely contested fantasy.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The purpose of the preceding chapter is to outline a materialist theory of the fantasies of race and racism in the United States and how they operate in capitalist society. Drawing from the tradition of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the work of Fredric

Jameson, and Negt and Kluge's writing on labor solidarity, I conceptualize fantasies as assemblages of discourses that enable subjects to conceptualize and articulate their relationships to totalities. Consistent with my discussion of ideology, fantasies can serve hegemonic and counterhegemonic purposes.

Race and racism, I have argued, constitute products of capitalist development that are neither essential elements of history nor autonomous sites of struggle. Thus far, I have explained the historical emergence of racial markers in the United States as a product of material development, particularly the advent of slavery as a primary source of labor power. Yet, racism did not die with slavery any more than the need to continue the exploitation of black labor. As the industrial revolution concentrated labor in urban sectors and African Americans emerged as capital's reserve army of labor, racist discourses persisted. As labor historian Sharon Smith writes of modern racism,

> Racism against Blacks and other racially oppressed groups serves both to lower the living standards of the entire working class and to weaken workers' ability to fight back. Whenever capitalists can threaten to replace one group of workers with another—poorly paid—group of workers, neither group benefits.[119]

In other words, racism continues to subordinate the "hydra" of resistance to exploitation and oppression by conditioning subjects within a regime of hegemonic fantasy.

It is my position that the modern marks of contemporary racism are of a predominantly criminalized nature. *In other words, racism in America is primarily circulated through rhetorics of criminality*. As this project argues, the marks inscribed upon racialized bodies to subordinate resistance also become sources of counterhegemonic rhetorical invention through the genre of gangsta rap. Consequentially, the following chapter describes how the *mark of criminality* constitutes an assemblage of discourses of racialized criminality that help to sustain racist fantasies in modern America.

[1] King 2004, 1.
[2] For an brief literature review of work related to race and Communication Studies, see McPhail 2001.
[3] McPhail 2002, 12.
[4] Condit and Lucaites 1993.
[5] Wilson 1999, 206.
[6] See, for example, Crenshaw 1997; Nakayama and Krizek 1999; Wander, Martin, and Nakayama 1999.
[7] See Watts 2002; 2001a; 2001b.
[8] Aristotle 2001.
[9] Other similar concepts include ideographs, nodal points, and cultural fictions. See McGee 1980; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Hartnett 2002.
[10] See, for example, Davis 1990; Dubber 2004; Reeves and Campbell 1994; Zinn 1999.
[11] Reeves and Campbell 1994.
[12] Bitzer 2005.
[13] Guillaumin 1995, 139.
[14] Ibid, 142.
[15] Hall et al. 1978, 347.
[16] Also see Sloop 1996.
[17] Wilson 1999.
[18] For more on Greene's perspective, see Greene 2004. For a historical materialist reply, see Cloud, Macek, and Aune 2006. Also see Cloud 1994; 2006b; Condit 2008; Artz, Macek, and Cloud 2006; Triece 2007.
[19] On constitutive rhetoric, see Charland 1987. Also see McGee 1975.
[20] See Cloud 2006a; 1994.
[21] Of course there are also labor practices that go into the production of gangsta rap records and music videos. While this certainly includes the reciting of raps, scratching of records, and playing of instruments, it also entails the production of the raw materials for musical recording, the packaging for compact disks, the televisions and computers necessary for viewing music videos, playing music, and even producing some elements of the albums, as well as the driving of trucks required to transport CDs across the country. The key difference between Greene's perspective and mine, then, is my commitment to viewing labor as necessarily connection to the production of commodities and value.
[22] See Marx 1990.
[23] Marx and Engels 2005.
[24] For seminal "post-Marxist" texts, see Hardt and Negri 2000; Laclau and Mouffe 1985.
[25] See Marx and Engels 2005.
[26] Marx 1978, 150; 148.
[27] Engels 1988, 700. See Germino 1990; Laclau and Mouffe 1985.
[28] Engels 1978, 760. Emphasis in original.
[29] Chang 2005; Lipsitz 1994.

[30] Althusser 1972, 155.
[31] Horkheimer and Adorno 1991. Another member of the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin, was more optimistic about the role of mass culture in resistance. See Benjamin 2003.
[32] See Althusser 1972.
[33] Gramsci 1971, 235.
[34] Gramsci 1971, 5.
[35] See, for example, Germino 1990; West 1988, 17-34; Hall 1999; Zompetti 1997.
[36] For examples of Marxists engaging the question of race, see Lenin 1975; Shawki 2006; Trotsky 1970.
[37] Greene 2004.
[38] Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 115.
[39] See, for example, Barrett 1980; Jaggar 1983; Roediger 1991.
[40] Thompson 1963.
[41] Jameson 1991, 51.
[42] For examples of two attempts to do just this, see separate interviews conducted by black feminists bell hooks and Angela Davis with gangsta rapper Ice Cube. Chang 2005, 334-7; hooks 1994, 125-43.
[43] Eagleton 1991, xiii.
[44] Williams 1977, 113. Emphasis added.
[45] Marx and Engels were themselves highly critical of so-called "Utopian Socialists" whose visions of interclass harmony were, they argued, untenable given the antagonisms at the heart of capitalist relations. See Engels 1988.
[46] Jameson 2007, 33.
[47] Marx and Engels 2005.
[48] Jameson 1981, 286.
[49] Ibid, 289-90.
[50] Ibid, 290.
[51] de Certeau 1988.
[52] Ono and Sloop 1992, 53. Emphases in original.
[53] Ibid, 55.
[54] West 1999b, 484.
[55] See Chang 2005; Davis 2006.
[56] See Lacan 1977; 1978; Seshadri-Crooks 2000.
[57] See, for example, Jameson 1991.
[58] Bormann, Knutson, and Musolf 1997.
[59] Bormann 1972.
[60] Cragan and Shields 1992.
[61] Bormann 1972, 397.
[62] Bormann, Cragan, and Shields 2003, 368.
[63] See, for example Freud 1977; Nietzsche 1998.
[64] Gunn 2003, 52.

[65] Gunn 2008a. Also see Peters 1999.
[66] For more on Lacanian psychoanalysis, see Lacan 1977; 1978.
[67] Gunn 2008a, 137. On fantasy, see Žižek 1989.
[68] On trauma related to 9-11, see Biesecker 2007; Gunn 2004; Taylor 2003; Žižek 2002. For more on trauma in general, see Caruth 1995; Scarry 1985.
[69] See Freud 2008.
[70] See, for example, Cloud 1994; Condit 2008; Eagleton 2003.
[71] Cloud 2006b, 330.
[72] Ibid, 342.
[73] Negt and Kluge 1993.
[74] Ibid, 33.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Jameson 1992, 29.
[77] Ibid, 34.
[78] See Zirin 2005; 2008.
[79] Jameson 1992, 29.
[80] Negt and Kluge 1993, 34.
[81] Eagleton 1991, xiii.
[82] Jameson 1981.
[83] Negt and Kluge 1993, 43.
[84] Ibid, 36.
[85] Marx and Engels 2005.
[86] Negt and Kluge 1993, 39.
[87] Mailloux 1998, 41.
[88] Jameson 2007, 31.
[89] West 1988, 18. Emphasis in original.
[90] Robinson 1983, 2.
[91] Alcoff 2006, 213.
[92] See Laclau and Mouffe 1985.
[93] Meyerson 2000.
[94] Alcoff 2006, 196.
[95] Guillaumin 1995, 30.
[96] McPhail 2002; Wilson1999.
[97] See, for example, Alcoff 2006; Seshadri-Crooks 2000.
[98] See Robinson 1983; West 1988. For a review and critique of such perspectives, see Meyerson 2000.
[99] Hall 1999.
[100] James 1948; Robinson 1983.
[101] Bell 1992, 12. Emphasis in original.
[102] McPhail 2002, 198.
[103] Also see Brown et al. 2003; Hill Collins 2005.
[104] Wander, Martin, and Nakayama 1999, 22.

[105] Dyer 1997, 1.
[106] See, for example, Faegin and Vera 2005; Jensen 2005.
[107] Seshadri-Crooks 2000, 21.
[108] Ibid, 7.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, 4.
[111] See Marx 1990.
[112] Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, 92.
[113] Ibid.
[114] See Williams 1994; Shawki 2006.
[115] Fields 1990.
[116] Guillaumin 1995, 141.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Williams 1994, 19.
[119] Smith 2006, 25.

Chapter 2: Constructing Fantasies of Race and Crime Through the Mark of Criminality

In his legendary fictional closing argument in defense of Tom Robinson, Atticus Finch spoke of "the evil assumption that all Negroes lie, all Negroes are basically immoral beings, all Negro men are not to be trusted around our women."[1] Both the novel and film *To Kill a Mockingbird* are iconic precisely because they chronicle a longstanding fantasy about the criminal pathologies of the African American subject (and its undoing). As Harper Lee's famous fable eloquently documented, all elements of a criminal case—ranging from whose testimony is to be trusted to how a white man defending a black man accused of raping a white woman might be treated by his community—are structured around this central fantasy.

In the previous chapter, I described fantasy as a methodological tool for understanding rhetorical confrontations with totality, noting that fantasies might work to sustain or challenge hegemonic structures. I then described how racism has operated as a fantastical assemblage of racial markers enlisted to subordinate African Americans to the interests of capital. I ended the preceding discussion of race and racism with an analysis of the American justifications of slavery, noting that the fantasies of racism associated with the period following emancipation increasingly circulated around the criminalization and incarceration of black subjects. And so begins this chapter, engaging the criminal justice system as the primary site of racial struggle that contextualizes my main period of interest: 1988-1997. Below, I first outline my theoretical understanding of how crime and race intersect to sustain prevailing social relations and, second, historicize the *mark of criminality* and the fantasies of moral panic associated with criminality that contextualize this project.

CRIME, CAPITALISM, AND THE BLACK COMMUNITY

From a working class standpoint, capitalism itself might appear to be a form of theft. How else would one imagine an economic system whose life-blood is the extraction of surplus value from laboring subjects? Yet, what does and does not "count" as crime is profoundly contingent and those who wield the most power in a society are rarely marked as criminal.[2] But what determines how the criminal act becomes constituted as such? Perhaps the most influential study of crime and punishment is Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. In it, he traces the development of punishment from the spectacle of the public execution to the "age of sobriety" in which punishment became hidden and rehabilitation was the order of the day. The result, Foucault argues, was a more subdued regime of so-called bio-power. For Foucault, discipline now resides *within* the subject as state surveillance has produced docile self-surveiling bodies.[3] Punishment, in other words, corresponds with the character of power. Power, he writes, "produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production."[4] There is no outside of power for Foucault.

A Foucauldian perspective on crime and punishment implies limited conditions of possibility for resistance.[5] Adopting such a perspective, Sloop acknowledges the existence of resistant voices within the modern "cultural prison." He nonetheless insists, "Even these voices are mediated, filtered, and diluted by the discourse of dominant culture."[6] While I agree that resistance must confront the discursive space dominated by prevailing ideologies, those ideologies must also respond to pressure exerted from below. Such an orientation toward resistance is central to the understanding of hegemony I outlined in the previous chapter. In other words, crime and criminality—both in their

material and discursive manifestations—are the products of antagonistic struggle rather than totalizing regimes of power.

In one of his earliest political writings, Marx observed,

> Value is the civil mode of existence of property, the logical expression through which it first becomes socially comprehensible and communicable. It is clear that this objective defining element provided by the nature of the object itself must likewise be the objective and essential defining element for the punishment.[7]

This passage comes from a series of articles he wrote in 19th Century Germany, where the "theft" of wood legally and rhetorically came into being. Prior to this convening of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly, it had been customary for peasants to gather fallen wood from Rhineland forests for their own use. However, as capitalist development began to colonize the forests and require the labor power of its peasantry, such ordinary practices became a threat to the emerging market economy. By broadening the definition of theft to the accumulation of fallen wood, the assembly helped both solidify private ownership of previously communal forests and force the people of the Rhineland into waged labor by rendering their survival outside of capital a criminal offense.[8] In other words, now that the forests represented an opportunity for the production of value, the acquisition and use of wood outside of such a system had to become a crime.

Linebaugh has also documented the contingency of criminality during early European capitalism. Through several case studies, he describes how ordinary workers in shipyards and docks gradually became marked as "criminals" for partaking in such traditional practices as bringing woodchips home from the shipyard. These new codes of conduct—many punishable by hanging—came in response to capitalism's expansion and the corresponding need for employers to guard their possessions more jealously.[9] Commenting on the dynamics of the era, Hartnett explains, "There is a dialectical relationship between the international expansion of the empire…and the domestic need to

redefine popular notions of crime and property."[10] Thus, changing material conditions produced new fantasies associated with transgression and criminality.

The legacy of American penal policy is similarly affixed to the dynamics of capital and the character of property relations. The birth of the Republic coincided with lively public debates associated with the nature of punishment and how the state might administer it most properly and effectively. As historian Adam Hirsch writes, "The wholesale incarceration of criminals is in truth a comparatively recent episode in the history of Anglo-American jurisprudence."[11] The American prison first emerged as a philosophical corrective to public executions and torture associated with theft and other nonviolent offenses. Influential thinkers like Italian author Cesare Beccaria envisioned the prison as a source for rehabilitative reflection and personal transformation.[12] However, Beccaria's critique of grotesque public punishments was not simply motivated by a benevolent concern for the punished subject. Rather, he worried that the spectacle of public punishments risked provoking volatile crowds in ways that might threaten the hegemony of the state. In his study of Philadelphia during the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries, Michael Meranze notes that ritualistic public punishments represented a gamble on the part of the state that required the cooperation of the condemned (through their confession) and the populace (through their attendance and capacity to absorb the punishment's pedagogical injunction to behave). Meranze writes, "The instabilities of public punishment marked the limits of public authority, demonstrating the dependence of the governors on those they governed."[13]

Beccaria saw in courts and the prison institutions that would persuade citizens to more directly identify their own interests with those of the state. In a particularly telling passage, Beccaria writes,

> Verdicts and the proof of guilt should be public, so that opinion, which is perhaps the only cement holding society together, can restrain the use of force and the influence of the passions, and so that the people shall say that they are not slaves but that they are protected, which is a sentiment to inspire courage and as valuable as a tax to a sovereign who knows his true interests.[14]

In other words, the courts and the prison, Beccaria believed, were more capable of producing rational allegiances to the state than the gallows or the whip. This echoes Hannah Arendt's position that a state that has resorted to violence does not have power. She explains, "Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power's disappearance."[15] Hartnett explains,

> This shift from a form of social control based on the violent spectacle of often arbitrarily assigned bodily torture to "rational" discourse grounded on a formalized and universal set of laws indicates a dramatic transformation in the exercise of political authority from a dependence on outright terror to what we call today "ideology."[16]

Thus, the *purpose* of punishment did not change with the emergence of the prison. It remained a project committed to the enforcement of property laws and the complicity of the citizenry. As property rights came to transcend the norms of feudal culture and the market began to take shape, the courts and the prison represented a new social contract in which so-called "semiotic" modes of punishment served to mediate new social relations between propertied and non-propertied classes.[17]

Yet, echoing Jameson's writing on ideology and utopia, the emerging penitentiary was nonetheless at the mercy of a *contingently* acquiescent populace. As Meranze writes, "penal ideology presupposed a struggle within each person between respect for authority and rebellion."[18] A policed public, in other words, is not a satisfied one. This project hinges on nothing less than the insight that a carceral society functions to contain the potential unruliness of a people. Quite possibly the most pronounced testament to the social antagonisms that underlie the American criminal justice system and their potential

for rupture is in the intersection between race and criminality following the abolition of slavery.

Racializing criminality

Slavery, of course, was absolutely central to the early growth of the American economy before and following independence.[19] However, after the Civil War ended slavery, southern economies still sought mechanisms for exploiting free black labor. The Thirteenth Amendment forbade slavery and "involuntary servitude" except "as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted."[20] Noting a silver lining in the dark cloud of emancipation, former slave states turned to imprisonment as a method for continuing the enslavement of blacks. "Black Codes" were specifically designed to increase African Americans' likelihood of incarceration. Convictions for offenses such as vagrancy resulted in a disproportionate number of blacks in U.S. prisons in the south. Prisoner leasing programs then created an institution almost identical to slavery, allowing plantation owners and other capitalists to lease prisoner labor from the state. Thus, the prison system of the post-Civil War South helped sustain these damaged regional economies by reinventing slavery to correspond with the new legal climate.[21]

Throughout recent American history, free blacks have constituted a "reserve army of labor." As Marxist economist Harry Braverman notes, the expansion and subsequent mechanization of capital gave way to a larger, lower-paid, and often non-union service sector. This new economy produced "a relative surplus of population available for employment at the lower pay rates that characterize these new mass occupations."[22] Yet, even those low paying jobs have not always been available to black Americans living in urban ghettos. Cyril Robinson argues that African American workers have consistently represented "a group of mostly low-skilled laborers who did the dirtiest, hardest, and

lowest-paying jobs, often substituting as strikebreakers, laid-off during recession and slow production periods, to be rehired as needed by employers."[23]

Even as it was often excluded from the workings of capital, this reserve army sought alternative sources of survival. Drawing parallels between the experiences of black citizens in England and the United States, Stuart Hall and his colleagues suggest that these racialized reserve armies of labor constituted their own "colony" excluded from the workings of the market economy and largely concentrated in economically disadvantaged urban sectors. They write, "The reconstruction of the black 'colony' opened up a new range of survival strategies within the black community."[24] The authors describe the "range of informal dealing, semi-legal practices, rackets and small-time crime classically known in all ghetto life as 'hustling'."[25] Black citizens of both nations, because they constituted a reserve army of labor, came to assemble their own economies internal to the day-to-day workings of the abandoned ghetto.[26]

The "hustles" that typified so many urban ghettos in the United States were those criminal activities—particularly the drug trade—perpetrated by street gangs. By the early 1970s, the Black Panthers and other radical African American groups were disoriented and ultimately ineffective due to a federal program called COINTELPRO. A combination of brute force, infiltration, false arrests, and wrongful imprisonment undermined the viability of the Panthers.[27] What resulted was a power vacuum in the inner-city communities the party sought to organize. As Alejandro Alonso argues,

> Shortly after the [Black Panther Party] power base was eliminated and as other social and political groups became ineffective, teenagers in South LA started a small street group to serve as a quasi-political organization. Teens too young to participate in the BPP movement during the 1960s had nonetheless absorbed much of the rhetoric of community control of neighborhoods. What started off as a quasi-political unit slowly developed into a group of misguided teens.[28]

These "misguided" youths coalesced into street gangs. Although these gangs initially attempted to restore the political program of the Black Panthers and other nationalist groups, they ultimately resorted to criminal behavior and inter-factional conflict. The proliferation of black street gangs during this era has been credited not only with the growth of black-on-black crime in inner-city areas, but also the devastating circulation of drugs such as crack cocaine.[29] The emergence of gangs has also created the condition of possibility for even more fantasies associated with dangerous and pathologically criminal African Americans that help justify their mass incarceration.[30]

A primary focal point of the mass public hysteria associated with gangs and drugs during the 1980s and 1990s was the area known as South Central Los Angeles, or southern Los Angeles County. Cities such as Watts and Compton are relevant to this project not only for their iconic status as sites of criminal activity, police repression, and occasional collective uprising, but also because they gave rise to the earliest prominent gangsta rap artists. South Central is a particularly troubling example of how a racialized reserve army of labor might come to criminality—discursively and materially—by way of capitalist contingencies. The election of Ronald Reagan to the White House in 1980 ushered an era of sustained federal budget cuts and a widening rich-poor gap that dealt significant damage to American inner cities.[31] The Regan years were marked by a pronounced pro-business economic policy that favored market deregulation, targeted tax cuts for upper-income households, an antagonist posture toward organized labor, soaring investments in the military, and sustained budget cuts for social programs. Reagan and his allies largely premised their cuts in the social safety net on racially charged caricatures of welfare cheats and drug dealers who simply did not desire to partake in the American Dream of upward mobility.[32] This logic would extend well into the first Bush

and Clinton administrations as rhetorics of family and personal responsibility personalized social issues and rationalized further erosions of social welfare programs.[33]

This era of social and economic upheaval dealt devastating dividends to urban areas like South Central. During the 1980s, 131 industrial plants in South Central Los Angeles closed their doors.[34] Service sector employment no doubt replaced these unionized jobs (which moved overseas) but rarely remained in predominantly black areas like Watts or Compton. Rather, they moved to mostly white suburban sectors. As Mike Davis writes in his classic study of Los Angeles,

> In simplified terms, Los Angeles's Black community became more internally polarized as public sector craftworkers, clericals and professionals successfully entrenched themselves within city, county and federal bureaucracies, while the semi-skilled working class in the private sector was decimated by the dual impact of job suburbanization and economic internationalization.[35]

Historian Howard Zinn documents the national toll of Reagan-era policies on the African American community as a whole:

> At the end of the eighties, at least a third of African-American families fell below the official poverty level, and black unemployment seemed fixed at two and a half that of whites, with young blacks out of work at the rate of 30 to 40 percent. The life expectancy of blacks remained at least ten years lower than that of whites. In Detroit, Washington, and Baltimore, the mortality rate for black babies was higher than in Jamaica or Costa Rica.[36]

This precarious relationship to the market led many young inner city African Americans to partake in activities marked as criminal.[37] One particularly destructive opportunity for profit and employment was the introduction of crack cocaine to inner city streets. This cheaper and highly addictive freebased form of cocaine spread particularly quickly among poor African Americans.[38] Davis writes, "The deafening public silence about youth unemployment and the juvenation of poverty has left many thousands of young street people with little alternative but to enlist in the crypto-Keynesian youth

employment program operated by the cocaine cartels."[39] As Davis's words suggest, these criminal practices often mimic the legal business enterprises of capitalism. Labor is still exploited and profits still emerge.[40] These parallels support my position that activities marked as criminal are not necessarily more or less damaging to human welfare than those deemed legitimate, but are so marked based on their relationship to the needs of capital. The economy of drugs and other illicit commodities of the inner city would become a shadow economy for that reserve army of labor whose precarious relationship to the market had left them with precious few alternatives. This important fact of inner-city African American life would not only lead to the criminalization of black consumption practices, but also their counter-hegemonic deployment by gangsta rap artists. Survival, for many young black Americans, had indeed become a crime.

Such is the material context from which gangsta rap would emerge. The historical relationship between the prison system and the African American population is firmly affixed to the contingencies of the market. Prisons first began to partake in the warehousing of black citizens after former slaves acquired the legal status of *citizen*. Economies still in need of free racialized labor turned to the loopholes of Constitutional law to reinvent slavery through the twin forces of Black Codes and prisoner leasing programs. As historical development moved steadily away from the plantation, African Americans, particularly those in urban areas, would emerge as a reserve army of labor requiring alternative modes of survival. Such alternatives were often marked as criminal behaviors. This central characteristic of race and crime in American capitalism—a reserve army of labor reduced to transgressive means of accumulation—became particularly acute during the 1980s and the advent of the Regan Administration's pro-business economic agenda. The coming years would see the proliferation of street gangs and drug cartels in major inner city areas like South Central Los Angeles, providing a

political economic context for my exploration of gangsta rap. In order to understand how these material conditions helped give rise to the genre of gangsta, I shall now turn to the discursive criminalization of urban blacks during this era and the emergence of the racialized inscription I shall call the *mark of criminality*.

POLICING THE GHETTO, INSCRIBING SUBJECTIVITIES: MORAL PANICS AS FANTASY

In their study of public hysteria associated with "mugging" in London, Hall and his coauthors define a *moral panic* as an "ideological displacement" associated with material conditions.[41] Moral panics rarely respond to anything particularly *new* in civil society but "repackage" social anxieties in phenomena rhetorically rendered to represent a stark and immediate threat. Hall and his colleagues were particularly interested in public apprehension regarding mugging in London during the 1960s and 1970s. They noted how mugging was not new to the streets of London, nor had there been a statistical increase in incidents thereof. Rather, they submit that the profound surge in media coverage of mugging incidents constituted "a new *definition of the situation*—a new construction of the social reality of crime."[42] This social reality enforced both racist ideologies and a renewed public investment in the punishing power of the state. Such a moral panic, I argue, constitutes a fantasy because it helps to give form and meaning to structural realities. The concept of fantasy and its psychoanalytic heritage is helpful in imagining the moral panic as a resonant but falsifiable articulation of a social reality that is never entirely representable. Furthermore, my understanding of fantasy as an assemblage of preexisting discourses enables me to highlight how the very same discourses that constitute a moral panic might be enlisted to constitute alternative fantasies.

This project engages 1988-1997 as a sustained period of moral panic associated with racialized criminality in the United States; a moral panic in which gangsta rap was a cultural intervention and issue of pronounced public concern. The sensation of gangsta rap, in other words, created the conditions of possibility for a multifarious confrontation of fantasies associated with race and crime. In order to better articulate this phenomenon, I first describe the prevailing fantasies of racialized criminality in the United States before, second, charting the historical trajectory toward the moral panics of 1988-1997.

Interrogating the mark of criminality

In her study of race, gender, and victimhood, Carol Stabile writes, "No other ethnic or racial group has been singled out for the wholesale criminalization to which African Americans have been subjected during the last four decades of the twentieth century."[43] Black men and women are largely construed as criminal threats to the social order, while their neighborhoods are stigmatized as breeding grounds for criminal pathology.[44] One of the more illuminating ways to approach such discourse is by highlighting the racial disparities associated with criminality and victimhood.

For example, one of the best-documented disparities in the administration of capital punishment in the United States is based on the race of the victim in any given case. Not only is a white murder victim more likely to generate a death sentence than any other, but a white victim murdered by a black culprit is *the* most likely combination to do so.[45] The logical conclusion for many death penalty opponents is that jurors tend to hold white lives in higher regard than those of racial minorities. Indeed, in his study of juries in capital cases, Benjamin Fleury-Steiner found that jurors come to view trials through in-group and out-group paradigms. This often results in all or predominantly white juries identifying more strongly with white victims or defendants than their African American

counterparts.[46] In a fascinating and troubling study of juries in capital cases, Phillip Goff and his colleagues noted how sentencing decisions are, at least in part, informed by a prevailing cultural association of blacks with apes.[47] In other words, fantasies of racial identification inform jurors' perceptions of victimhood and culpability.

Perhaps the most notorious contemporary example of this relationship between the white victim and black culprit is George H.W. Bush's use of the "Willie Horton ad" in his 1988 presidential bid against Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis. Horton was an African American prisoner released on a weekend furlough in Massachusetts while Dukakis was governor. During his temporary release, Horton robbed a white couple, raping the woman. Upon discovering this skeleton in his opponent's closet, the Bush campaign and its supporters ran a series of provocative ads often credited with decisively shifting the election in the then-Vice President's favor. The Horton ad both capitalized upon an era of tough-on-crime politics that had proliferated since the Nixon administration and helped to further harden public attitudes on crime and punishment.[48]

Central to the privileging of the white victim who is vulnerable to the black culprit is the rhetorical threat construction of the black criminal on the attack. As the Horton narrative suggests, black threat construction is highly sexualized. Kobena Mercer writes,

> The primal fantasy of the big black penis projects the fear of a threat not only to white womanhood, but to civilization itself, as the anxiety of miscegenation, eugenic pollution and racial degeneration is acted out through white male rituals of racial aggression—the historical lynching of black men in the United States routinely involved the literal castration of the Other's strange fruit.[49]

As Mercer notes, racial lynchings—which are themselves precursors to the American prison-industrial complex—were incredibly gendered public performances in which the mutilation and hanging of predominantly black men in the Jim Crow south enacted what

Dora Apel describes as "both race and gender anxieties that criminalized sexual relations between black men and white women and feared the enfranchisement and education of African Americans that might further such relations and destabilize the white-dominated power structure."[50] Lynchings were often performed in the name of protecting white women from hyper-sexualized black men. High-profile cases like the fatal beating of teenager Emmett Till for whistling at a southern white women and the discredited prosecution of the Scottsboro Boys for raping two white women similarly attest to troubling presumption that black men possess an intrinsic propensity to sexually brutalize white women.[51] The more recent and sensationalized example of African American football legend O.J. Simpson's trial and eventual acquittal for the murder of his white ex-wife and her white male "friend" suggests that the troubled relationship between black men and white women remains prevalent in modern America.[52]

Black sexuality and black masculinity in particular are criminalized by modern capitalism. Patricia Hill Collins argues:

> Representations that reduce Black men to the physicality of their bodies, that depict and inherent promiscuity as part of authentic Black masculinity, that highlight the predatory skills of the hustler, and that repeatedly associate young Black men in particular with violence converge in the controlling image of Black men as booty call-seeking rapists.[53]

bell hooks adds, "Negative stereotypes about the nature of black masculinity continue to overdetermine the identities black males are allowed to fashion for themselves."[54] hooks's words echo Wilson and Hall et al.'s conclusion that racialized subjects become aware of their subjectivity, at least in part, through the prism of race.[55] De Coster and Heimer write that poor and working class African American males and other "marginalized masculinities" may view crime and violence as "resources for achieving or

demonstrating masculinity" absent their access to more hegemonic modes of articulating gendered identity.[56]

I, of course, do not intend to omit the troubling fact that African American women are themselves subject to "modern Black sexual stereotypes of the jezebel, the mammy, and the welfare queen that, in the United States, helped uphold slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and racial ghettoization."[57] Black sexuality is generally constructed ideologically in such a way that both sensationalizes it and demands its control. However, for a study of race and criminality, Hill Collins highlights a crucial gendered difference within dominant constructions of race and sexuality. She writes, "African women's sexuality may have piqued the prurient interest of Western audiences, but African men's sexuality was seen as dangerous and in need of control."[58] The fantasies associated with racialized criminality have, thus, been in the business of fomenting moral panic associated with black masculinity and seeking to confine it. Gangsta rap, we shall see, has itself been in the business of deploying discourses of a criminalized black masculinity with implications for male and female African Americans.

In addition to sexual violence, African Americans have long been identified as a community out of control. Especially since the Moynihan report of the Nixon era (which I discuss below), the myriad problems confronting black urban life have been internally attributed to personal failings rather than structural inequalities.[59] For example, influential conservative author Dinesh D'Souza refers to "a civilization breakdown [within the African American community] that stretches across class lines but is especially concentrated in the black underclass."[60] Black youth, in particular, are routinely rendered as ravenous thugs who join gangs and commit violent acts upon one another and members of other communities. This archetype has become particularly prominent in the past thirty years. Author Michael K. Brown and his colleagues write,

> Between the flowering of the civil rights movement and the Reagan years, the image of black youth in particular underwent an extraordinary transformation: the brave little girl walking up to the schoolhouse door in the face of jeering white crowds was replaced by fearsome young black men coming down the street ready to take your wallet or your life.[61]

Accompanying such a shift in imagery was a steady decline in the social programs the civil rights era helped to secure. [62] Thus, the disproportionate incarceration of poor African Americans constituted a collective punishment of sorts, inscribing the mark of criminality upon an entire community. This central element of crime hysteria echoes Meranze's observation about public punishments in Philadelphia; that they were "designed to spread terror and respect for the state's law throughout society" by working to "implicate the community in the fate of the condemned."[63] Similarly, the singular imprisoned African American subject implicates the entire black urban populace. The result has been a community presumed to be an always already looming criminal threat.

The ongoing "War on Drugs" also benefited from and helped to reify discourses of violent black youth and their anarchic communities. Jimmie Reeves and Richard Campbell describe how the disparate media coverage between predominantly white cocaine use and black crack consumption supported a broader regime of reactionary politics endemic to the Reagan era of the 1980s. They note, "The crack crisis coverage and its images of black youth running wild in the streets, out of control, would resonate with the prevailing attitudes toward color-coded special-interest groups of the predominantly white Reagan counterrevolution."[64] A significant sentencing disparity between convictions for powder and crack cocaine possession corresponded with this pronounced bias in media coverage.[65] Consequently, the fantasy of black youth as violent, dangerous, and irredeemable helped to justify the institutional neglect and mass incarceration of poor and racialized communities in the United States.

The presumption that African Americans are criminal and dangerous has helped sustain deep divisions between white and black communities. As historian Kenneth T. Jackson documents, longstanding practices in real estate and city planning designed to separate races and place minorities in more dangerous and impoverished areas are premised on assumptions about minority violence and the impossibility of racial coexistence. Many policies and political discourses are also based on the belief that black families are somehow deficient and incapable of functioning in civil (read: white) society.[66] The most infamous of these discourses was the 1965 "Moynihan Report" which diagnosed a deterioration of black society due to the failure of the family.[67] Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's highly influential report provided an intellectual foundation for the Nixon-led "war on crime" and subsequent initiatives toward the policing and incarceration of working class African Americans. Decades later, Vice President Dan Quayle famously blamed the Los Angeles Riots on a deficit of "family values" among African Americans. President Ronald Reagan helped construct the archetype of the "welfare queen" as a parasitic black woman who produced children for the sole purpose of collecting welfare checks. Implicit in the mark of criminality is a set of negative assumptions about black life in general.[68]

Rhetoric plays a vital role in inscribing the mark of criminality. Whether in the form of celebratory photography constituting a white community via the lynching of a black man, political address during a campaign year, or news media helping to cultivate moral panic about minority drug use, African Americans are disproportionately identified as criminal, hypersexual, and dysfunctional in mainstream fantasies. It is my position that this regime of inscriptions provides the inartistic proofs with which dominant and resistant fantasies might be constituted and deployed *vis-à-vis* racialized criminality.

Inventing moral panic: Fantasy and the Bush-Clinton years

Having outlined how race and criminality constitute a system of inscriptions that comprise the mark of criminality and produce racist fantasies, I now detail how these rhetorical tools have come to constitute the dominant fantasy of moral panic associated with racialized criminality from 1988-1997. I have selected this nine year period not only because of its correspondence with important stages in the history of gangsta rap, but also because the historical space between George H.W. Bush's electoral defeat of Michael Dukakis and the conclusion of William Jefferson Clinton's first term in the White House represents a salient historical period in rhetorics of race and criminality in the United States. The following section begins the work of portraying this era's dominant fantasies.

To understand the historical origins of this period, it is important to look back 20 years to the emergence of contemporary crime hysteria. In 1968, Richard Nixon partially staked his successful presidential bid on waging a "war on crime." Amid the political flames of the era associated with the Vietnam War, Black Power, gender struggles, and other movements, Nixon assumed a posture of "law and order" and posited himself as a source of stability in tumultuous times.[69] Accepting the 1968 nomination of the Republican Party, Nixon declared,

> Let those who have the responsibility to enforce our laws, and our judges who have the responsibility to interpret them, be dedicated to the great principles of civil rights. But let them also recognize that the first civil right of every American is to be free from domestic violence. And that right must be guaranteed in this country.[70]

He later stated in his 1970 State of the Union address,

> We have heard a great deal of overblown rhetoric during the sixties in which the word "war" has perhaps too often been used—the war on poverty, the war on misery, the war on disease, the war on hunger. But if there is one area where the word "war" is appropriate it is in the fight against crime. We must declare and win the war against the criminal elements which increasingly threaten our cities, our homes, and our lives.[71]

Adopting the very populist discourses of "civil rights" and "war" that had propelled a period of social justice activism, Nixon resituated public anxieties about disorder within a fantasy of moral panic. Sociologist Deevah Pager writes, "Nixon's 'war on crime' rhetorically elevated crime policy to the level of national concern, calling for a coordinated effort to combat the problems of crime and social decay."[72] She adds that prior to Nixon's political ascent, crime, although profoundly racialized, was generally believed to be a concern of local and state officials. However, for Nixon and subsequent presidents, policing criminal behavior became a matter of national importance. It represented nothing less than a central fantasy in the management of social upheaval largely associated with the racialized residue of the Civil Rights era.

Nixon's juxtaposition of law and order with civil rights and other social movements is telling. As Rodriguez writes of the Nixon legacy,

> Policing and criminal justice emerged in this way as socially productive technologies during a crucial historical conjuncture, forging an indelible linkage between the site and scene of the prison and the corresponding world of a consolidated and coherent—though always endangered—normative white civil society.[73]

Although, as my preceding discussion of race and capitalism suggests, I find Rodriguez's suggestion that white supremacy is the chief structural determinant in the prison-industrial complex problematic, his historical insight is nonetheless significant. He helpfully highlights Nixon's ability to construct a dominant fantasy of moral panic associated with crime and punishment—a panic that was profoundly racialized. As Walter Fisher has noted, Nixon's political success was in large part the result of his "materialist" rendering of the American Dream. Because Nixon avoided implicating his audience or engaging in radical critiques of the nation's political and cultural climate, he appealed to conservative voters traumatized by the vibrant period of upheaval.[74] The

thematic of crime fits nicely within this fantasy of America. Amid race riots in city streets and prisons, a continuing foreign policy quagmire in Vietnam, and forceful social movements speaking to power in ways impossible to ignore, locating social anxieties within the fear of criminal victimization provided an appealing and non-subversive fantasy of moral panic in the American populace.[75] In the greatest period of social transformation since the Great Depression, Richard Nixon and his supporters helped unleash a fantasy of criminality and moral panic that was largely structured by the mark of criminality.

As I have already discussed, the Reagan Administration also played a key role in setting the foundation for fantasies of fear and protection associated with race and crime during the late 1980s and 1990s. In addition to pursuing economic policies incredibly corrosive to the social and economic fabric of ethnic minorities in urban areas, Reagan helped reify the fantasies of the Nixon era in a far more fervent fashion than his post-Nixon predecessors.[76] In his 1985 State of the Union, he explained,

> Of all the changes in the past 20 years, none has more threatened our sense of national well-being than the explosion of violent crime. One does not have to be attacked to be a victim. The woman who must run to her car after shopping at night is a victim. The couple draping their door with locks and chains are victims; as is the tired, decent cleaning woman who can't ride a subway home without being afraid.[77]

Invoking images of crime victimization in locations readily associated with racialized urban areas, Reagan declares his own war on crime. Reagan also blamed the social programs he would slash from his presidential budgets for creating a "new privileged class" of lazy welfare cheats who would prefer to stay home, use drugs, and parasitically live on taxpayer dollars. By associating crime and victimization with the degraded lives of inner-city minorities, Reagan deployed the mark of criminality to justify both his tough-on-crime policies and his neoliberal market agenda.[78]

No front in the offensive against crime was more important to Reagan or his successor George H.W. Bush than the "War on Drugs." In particular, Reagan launched a full-scale assault on the sale and consumption of crack cocaine. As I noted earlier, Reagan's offensive was supported by biased media coverage of drug stories.[79] Black crack cocaine users were constructed as far more a threat than predominantly white powder cocaine consumers. However, as Doris Provine notes, Reagan was less concerned with responding to public hysteria than *creating* it. She writes, "A punitive drug war would play well among middle-class suburban voters concerned that their children might be attracted to drugs. The human costs of enforcement would be borne by people with whom they did not identify or sympathize."[80] Although crack cocaine undoubtedly had a devastating material impact on young people in urban areas, the lasting legacy of the Reagan's war against it was the constitution of a fantasy in which racialized criminal predators were responsible for social disorder. Provine continues,

> Reagan appealed to his base by stressing individual responsibility for moral choices and downplaying structural factors at play in unemployment, urban decay, and other human troubles. It was easy to blame urban ills on crack and to demonize crack dealers as a scourge to civilization, threatening productive elements of society… The strategy involved attacking policies targeted toward Blacks and minorities, without reference to race, but in a way that would polarize the electorate along racial lines.[81]

The war on drugs was, in effect, an enthymatic assault on the black inner city enacted with the mark of criminality. By constructing a fantasy with the ready-made inscriptions of racialized criminality (dangerous thugs, wasting inner-cities, sexual threats, etc.), Reagan and his allies helped sustain a broader regime of policies that enhanced racial divisions and widened the gap between working people and wealthy Americans.[82]

The material ramifications of the drug war were most pronounced and sensationalized in what would become the epicenter of early gangsta rap: South Central

Los Angeles. As job prospects and political organizations waned during the 1970s and into the Reagan years, street gangs gradually came to take their place. With the introduction of crack, South Central quickly developed into a drug economy. This new market also provoked inter and intra-racial gang conflicts, leading to heightened violence. Los Angeles County became a militarized zone as security fences and forces were increasingly enlisted to protect commercial areas, gated communities, and other interests attached to economic elites. The ghettoes of South Central had been drained of capital and isolated.[83]

This isolation, however, did not prevent the Los Angeles Police Department from exercising unprecedented amounts of force on the South Central community.[84] Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates served from 1978 until 1992 and became a vocal crusader for tough-on-crime, anti-drug policies. His coordinated sting operations often doubled as public performances. "Operation HAMMER" was the name given to a sustained raid on South Central that began in 1987 and extended into the early 1990s. Davis describes an inaugural HAMMER raid:

> Like a Vietnam-era search-and-destroy mission—and many senior police are proud Vietnam veterans—Chief Gates saturates the street with his "Blue Machine"," jacking up thousands of local teenagers at random like so many surprised peasants. Kids are humiliatingly forced to "kiss the sidewalk" or spread-eagle against police cruisers while officers check their names against computerized files of gang members. There are 1,453 arrests; the kids are processed in mobile booking centers, mostly for trivial offences like delinquent parking tickets or curfew violations. Hundreds more, uncharged, have their names and addresses entered into the electronic gang roster for future surveillance.[85]

Gates and his officers effectively turned an entire generation of African American youth into targets for law enforcement, ensuring that even those with no connection to gangs were surveiled by the state and carried the stigma of guilt-by-association (i.e. the mark of criminality).[86] Such was the environment of South Central that would give rise to gangsta.

George H.W. Bush was elected to the White House in 1988, the same year N.W.A. released their first album, *Straight Outta Compton*. As Vice President under Reagan, Bush was the heir apparent to his predecessor's policies, not least of all on crime. As I noted earlier, a political action committee (PAC) was responsible for releasing a provocative advertisement criticizing Bush's opponent, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis for being "soft" on crime. The simple ad used blue background, white text, and still photographs of Bush, Dukakis, and Willie Horton, the convict furloughed by Dukakis. After distinguishing Bush's pro-death penalty stance from Dukakis's abolitionist perspective, the segment shows an ominous photograph of the African American Horton, describing his original incarceration for murder. The male narrator—speaking in a deep, stern voice—then describes how Horton used a weekend furlough to kidnap a young couple, "stabbing the man and repeatedly raping his girlfriend."[87] While the ad has since been roundly condemned as complicit in reinforcing negative racial stereotypes about race, sex, and violence, many nonetheless credit the ad with sealing Bush's victory over the "liberal" Massachusetts governor.[88] In an excellent study of voter responses to political advertising, Kathleen Hall Jamison found that the Horton advertisement was successful not only in capitalizing upon preexisting assumptions about race and criminality, but *reinforcing and strengthening* those attitudes.[89] By associating the Dukakis campaign with Horton, an embodiment of the mark of criminality *par excellence*, Bush and his allies exploited longstanding fantasies of racialized fear and dependence on state protection.

Bush also continued Reagan-era theatrics associated with fighting drugs in such a way that, by 1989, helped convince 63 percent of Americans that drugs were the number one problem in America, compared to one percent in 1985.[90] When the Los Angeles uprising of 1992 affirmed the pronounced antagonism between the black community and

the LAPD after four police officers were acquitted in the videotaped beating of Rodney King; Bush, Vice President Dan Quayle, and a legion of other conservative commentators quickly blamed the riots on a pathological cultural malaise plaguing the black community.[91] The Bush Administration, in other words, was profoundly successful at enlisting the mark of criminality in the construction of a fantasy of an always and already looming black criminal threat responsible for its own destitution.

Although George Bush's policies and rhetoric associated with race and crime are not particularly surprising given the similar legacy of conservative politicians ranging from Nixon to Reagan, Bush's successor in the White House, Bill Clinton, pursued a remarkably similar course. After three consecutive humiliating presidential electoral defeats, the Democratic Party began espousing a more conservative agenda.[92] Prominent Democrats were particularly anxious to recover from the devastation wrought by the Willie Horton ad, adopting a "tough on crime" rhetorical strategy that proved incredibly effective.[93] For example, during his successful 1992 bid for the presidency against Bush, the Arkansas governor halted campaigning to preside over the execution of a mentally retarded black man named Rickey Ray Rector who had been convicted of murdering a police officer. This public performance of vigilance helped dispute accusations that Clinton was "soft on crime."[94] During his first term, Clinton successfully passed the 1994 Omnibus Crime Control Act and the 1996 Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act. These twin legislative forces expanded the federal death penalty to sixty crimes, appropriated $10 billion for prison construction, allocated funds for hiring more police officers, and significantly curtailed death row appeals.[95] Public opinion also corresponded with Clinton policies. For example, although national support for the death penalty steadily increased beginning in the late 1960s, it reached an all-time high of 80% during Clinton's first term in 1994.[96]

Clinton's "tough-on-crime" policies were accompanied by rhetorical strategies similar to those of Reagan and Bush. In addition to emphasizing the importance of law and order, Clinton routinely blamed problems like poverty and crime on urban populations. Elaine Brown writes,

> [What] Clinton policy became, and what America began to embrace, was the notion that any suffering arising from poverty or from degradation, oppression, or repression—in fact, any problems existing within the black community—was not the fault of the government or larger society. These problems existed because something was wrong with black people ourselves.[97]

Thus, the reputably liberal Clinton did little to distinguish himself from the policy or rhetorical legacy of his conservative predecessors. Continuing to enact policies that disproportionately incarcerated African Americans, the Clinton Administration also reified the prevailing fantasy of black criminal threats constructed through the mark of criminality.

This brief narrative of dominant fantasies of law and order, moral panic, and racialized criminality is intended to contextualize subsequent chapters' engagement of significant gangsta rap recordings and their role in shaping public discourse about race and crime in America. Subsequent chapters shall elaborate upon the deployment of fantasies during this era as they become relevant to my case studies. Specifically, N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton* (1988), Dr. Dre's *The Chronic*, Snoop Doggy Dogg's *Doggystyle* (1993), and the work of Tupac Shakur all intervene in this period of significant policy changes and rhetorical strategies associated with the criminal justice system.

It is my position that the climate of public deliberation regarding race and criminality during the years 1988-1997 was the constitutive product of a sustained ideological strategy first effectively employed by Richard Nixon in 1968. While crime

hysteria did not *begin* during the rise of gangsta rap, it nonetheless reached a *fever pitch* of social importance when gangsta confronted its key terms. The central fantasy of this hegemonic strategy was that crime is an always and already lurking threat that saturates the entire nation. Subsequently, politicians and, increasingly, the American public, came to conceptualize increased policing, mass incarceration, and the expansion of the death penalty as legitimate responses to crime. These policies were made possible in no small part by the rhetorical deployment of the system of inscriptions associated with black subjectivity I have called the mark of criminality, which rhetors inscribed upon racialized subjects popularly understood to be threats to social order. In what follows, I consider how gangsta rap constituted a pronounced, if ambivalent, cultural front against this dominant fantasy; an enactment of the mark of criminality that provoked no shortage of responses from numerous political, cultural, and racial sectors. The result, I argue, is nothing less than an epic battle over what it means to be black and criminal(ized) in America.

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[1] Mulligan 1962. Also see Lee 1960.
[2] For an example of one author's attempt to affix the label of criminal to a powerful figure in American civil society, see Bugliosi 2008.
[3] Foucault 1977.
[4] Ibid, 194.
[5] See, for example, Foucault 2001; 1994, 310
[6] Sloop 1996, 12.
[7] Marx 1842.
[8] Linebaugh 1993. On "bloody legislation," see Marx 1990.
[9] Linebaugh 1992.
[10] Hartnett 2000, 207.
[11] Hirsch 1992, xi.
[12] Beccaria 1986.
[13] Meranze 1996, 54.
[14] Beccaria, cited in Hartnett 2000, 205-6.
[15] Arendt 1972, 155. Also see Foucault 1977.
[16] Hartnett 2000, 205.
[17] Ibid.

[18] Meranze 1996, 27.
[19] See Williams 1994.
[20] "Additional Amendments to the Constitution" 2008.
[21] See, for example, Davis 2003; Novak 1978.
[22] Braverman 1998, 264.
[23] Robinson 1993, 321
[24] Hall et al. 1978, 351.
[25] Ibid.
[26] See, for example, Venkatesh 2006.
[27] Churchill and Vander Wall 2002.
[28] Alonso 2004, 668.
[29] Alonso 2004; Padilla 1992; Webb 1998.
[30] Stabile 2006.
[31] Chang 2005; Davis 2006.
[32] Reeves and Campbell 1994; Marable 2000; Zinn 1999. For an example of precisely this line of argumentation, see D'Souza 1995.
[33] See, for example, Selfa 2008. For an critique of such rhetorical strategies, see Cloud 1998a.
[34] Chang 2005.
[35] Davis 2006, 302.
[36] Zinn 1999, 569.
[37] Robinson 1993.
[38] Reeves and Campbell 1994.
[39] Davis 2006, 309.
[40] Also see Alonso 2004; Padilla 1992.
[41] Hall et al. 1978, 29.
[42] Ibid. Emphasis in original.
[43] Stabile 2006, 8.
[44] See, for example, Anderson 1995; Brown et al. 2003; Marable, Steinberg, and Middlemass 2007; Reeves and Campbell 1994.
[45] See, for example, Liptak 2008.
[46] Fleury-Steiner 2004.
[47] Goff et al. 2008
[48] Anderson 1995; Davis 2003; Jamieson 1993.
[49] Mercer 1997, 290.
[50] Apel 2004, 2. Also see Stabile 2006.
[51] See, for example, Kunstler 2003.
[52] See, for example, Fiske 1996. Also see Enck-Wanzer 2009.
[53] Hill Collins 2005, 166.
[54] hooks 2004, xii.
[55] Hall et al.1978; Wilson 1999.
[56] De Coster and Heimer 2006, 141.

[57] Hill Collins 2005, 28.
[58] Ibid, 31.
[59] See, for example, Cloud 1998b.
[60] See D'Souza 1995, 527; also Connerly 2000; McWhorter 2000; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997.
[61] Brown et al. 2003, 132.
[62] See Gasper 1995.
[63] Meranze 1996, 26; 47.
[64] Reeves and Campbell 1994, 90. See, also, Reinarman and Levine 1997.
[65] For more on the crack/powder cocaine sentencing disparity, see "Federal Crack Cocaine Sentencing" 2008.
[66] Jackson 1985.
[67] "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" 1965.
[68] See Cloud 1998b; Kelley 1997.
[69] See Perlstein 2008.
[70] Nixon 1968.
[71] Nixon 1970.
[72] Pager 2007, 9.
[73] Rodgríguez 2006, 24.
[74] Fisher 1973. Also see Perlstein 2008.
[75] See Gasper 1995.
[76] This is not to say that Presidents Ford and Carter did not help sustain the ascendancy of the prison-industrial complex. Rather, Reagan made crime a particularly pronounced part of his political identity. See Ibid.
[77] Reagan 1985.
[78] See Brown et al. 2003; Jordan-Zacherys 2007, 105.
[79] Reeves and Campbell 1994.
[80] Provine 2006, 280-1.
[81] Ibid, 281.
[82] See Cloud 1998a.
[83] Davis 2006.
[84] Alonso 2004; Davis 2006.
[85] Davis 2006, 268.
[86] Davis 2006; Chang 2005.
[87] "Willie Horton" 1988.
[88] See, for example, Anderson 1995.
[89] Jamieson 1993.
[90] Provine 2006, 283.
[91] See, for example, Cloud 1998b; Stabile 2006.
[92] See Selfa 2008.
[93] See Platt 2007; Provine 2006.
[94] See, for example, Dyson 2000.

[95] Selfa 2008.
[96] Newport 2007.
[97] Brown 2007, 44.

SECTION 2

GANGSTA RAP AND THE REINVENTION OF BLACK CRIMINALITY

Chapter 3: "The Niggaz on the Street is a Majority": Nationalism, Guerrilla Warfare, and N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton*

> The appearance of the settler has meant in the terms of syncretism the death of the aboriginal society, cultural lethargy, and the petrificaiton of individuals. For the native, life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler.
>
> – Frantz Fanon[1]

When N.W.A. released their legendary *Straight Outta Compton*, the United States was already approaching an explosive juncture in racial politics. Events like the massive movement to end Apartheid in South Africa, the beating and murder of a young black man named Michael Griffin by a white mob in Howard Beach, New York, the demise of Jesse Jackson's presidential ambitions following anti-Semitic remarks, and the rise of polarizing Nation of Islam Leader Louis Farrakhan to national prominence coalesced to create a racially-charged national atmosphere at a time when a generation of urban black youth had been "left to be abandoned or forcibly contained" by Reagan-era policies.[2] As I discussed in the previous chapter, South Central Los Angeles, which includes the City of Compton, was the victim of both capital flight and police militarization. Street gangs and drug cartels came to supplement much of the waning local economy and attract unprecedented amounts of police force that ensnared growing numbers of young black men into the apparatus of the criminal justice system.[3]

Furthermore, hysteria surrounding popular music emerged through the efforts of the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC). Formed in 1985, the organization helped create a mainstream national climate where politicians and cultural warriors competed to express their outrage about violent and overtly sexual lyrics, particularly in heavy metal and rap music. The PMRC decried misogynistic, sadomasochistic, satanic, and violent

content in popular culture and pressured record companies to adopt the now-familiar "Parental Advisory" stickers that adorn compact disc covers.[4]

While a number of cultural critics have effectively ghettoized gangsta rap, identifying it as the problematic opposite of more explicitly political, often nationalist-inspired acts like Public Enemy or the later work of Boogie Down Productions, I argue that N.W.A., the first gangsta rap group to achieve profound levels of commercial success, constitutes an enactment of the mark of criminality that resembles a Black Nationalist political project.[5] Specifically, N.W.A. deployed the mark of criminality toward the constitution of an affirmative urban space, Compton, and appropriation of the prerogative of violence from the law enforcement community. Theirs, I argue, is a fantasy of guerilla warfare waged with the mark of criminality.

I agree with Patricia Hill Collins, who speculates, "Despite the fact that the majority of African Americans most likely can define neither Black nationalism [*sic*] nor its major ideological strands, the ideas themselves may circulate in everyday life as a template for African American ethnicity."[6] I do not believe that N.W.A. deployed nationalist fantasies in an entirely self-conscious or politically beneficial fashion, but believe that reading *Straight Outta Compton* as a nationalist text enables critics to recognize an emancipatory gesture residing within the album that might inform more politically expedient cultural production and inform broader political practice. Put plainly, *Straight Outta Compton* represents a hugely successful album that gave form and shape to the struggles of a generation of criminalized youth. Those invested in challenging the racialized structures of the prison-industrial complex ignore the album's status as a political text at their own peril.

With or without N.W.A.'s conscious rhetorical invention, Black Nationalism functions discursively within *Straight Outta Compton* toward the constitution of an

alternative fantasy of black criminality. By highlighting the relationship between Black Nationalism and N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton*, I demonstrate how the mark of criminality is a site of struggle. Where N.W.A. found in dominant discourses of racialized criminality a source of agency and cultural commodity production, others saw a looming threat in need of containment. *Straight Outta Compton* generated unprecedented response from the law enforcement community seeking to reclaim the prerogative of violence. This contemporary variation on the epic battle between colonizer and colonized transformed the urban landscape of South Central Los Angeles into a site of fantastical struggle. Although I also note the numerous limitations of such discourse, I remain convinced that *Compton* contains a resistant impulse capable of destabilizing criminality and re-imagining political and rhetorical agency.

In order to clarify my reading of *Straight Outta Compton* as rhetorical guerrilla warfare, I will describe the tradition of Black Nationalism and its important role in black political practice in the United States. I also situate N.W.A. within the historical trajectory of hip-hop during the 1980s and the role of Black Nationalism therein. After contextualizing N.W.A.'s album, I offer a close reading of *Straight Outta Compton*, highlighting how the album's valorization of Compton and affirmation of criminal subjectivity operated within a nationalist fantasy. I also interrogate the forceful response from the law enforcement community to N.W.A.'s jarring intervention in black popular culture before offering concluding comments to my analysis.

NATIONALISM AND THE FANTASIES OF BLACK STRUGGLE IN AMERICA

Nationalism, in all of its forms, is a fantasy. Benedict Anderson describes the nation as "an imagined political community" where subjects who may never meet each other and may very well occupy irreconcilably antagonistic positions within social

structures nonetheless *imagine* their mutual communion.[7] The nation is a discursive formation that is neither entirely fictitious nor completely faithful to material conditions. Distinct from the *state*, the nation is understood here as the fantasy that sustains and rationalizes regimes of state power or works to challenge them and imagine alternative ways of being outside of dominant structures.[8] The nation contains both the makings of ideological mystification and the underlying impulses of utopian promise. Because it enables subjects to articulate their relationships to social structures through collectively shared assemblages of discourse, nationalism contains all the characteristics of fantasy.[9]

While hegemonic forms of nationalism are typically in the business of mystifying class antagonisms or justifying imperial conquests, the nationalisms of oppressed populations are invested in imagining political communities that offer alternatives to unacceptable social arrangements.[10] It enables the slave, peasant, or worker to imagine her or himself as part of a proud national tradition, whether it is located within traditional national borders or dispersed across a vast diasporic landscape.[11] Black Nationalism in the United States has traditionally drawn from both the centrality of the African continent to black identity, as well as solidarity with other nationalist struggles, such as those in Cuba, Vietnam, and pre-Franco Spain.[12] Black Nationalism, broadly conceived, "[accepts] the notion that black people constitute an organic unit" and "[focuses] on the goal of nation building or separate political and economic development."[13]

Although it represents a broad and diverse intellectual tradition, the iconic "founding father" of Black Nationalism is Marcus Garvey.[14] Garvey famously launched the "Back to Africa" movement through the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) during the early 20th Century, encouraging all black people to depart their current lands and return to native Africa to build a thriving, independent nation.[15] Central to Garvey's vision and Black Nationalism as a whole is the belief that black people were

forced into conditions not of their own making or choosing by the brutal apparatuses of colonialism and white supremacy.

Although Garvey's longing for a unified Africa has not come to fruition any more than it has gained hegemony in black intellectual thought, his central insight regarding a unified black people has undoubtedly accomplished the latter. Black Nationalism has had a significant impact on the philosophy of African American liberation throughout the 20th Century. Other than Garvey, the most important forces in the development and dissemination of Black Nationalist thought in America have been the Nation of Islam (NOI) and Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP).[16] In addition to these central organizations, specific individuals played an important role in the formation of Black Nationalist thought. These intellectuals included Harold Cruse, LeRoi Jones (a.k.a. Amiri Baraka), Robert F. Williams, C.L.R. James, George Jackson, Angela Davis, and Franz Fanon.[17]

Among the many salient issues these authors confronted, few were more pressing than the question of violence. For example, while Cruse supported centralizing culture as the key site of nationalist resistance, Jones and Williams envisioned nothing less than a violent revolution in the United States.[18] Franz Fanon's 1961 book *The Wretched of the Earth* was particularly influential in nationalist politics during the 1960s and 1970s. In his writings on colonialism and nationalism, Fanon argued violence was necessary not only as a response to the settler—because it was the only "language" he could understand—but also as a mechanism for purging the native culture of the colonizer's tainted legacy. Unforgiving guerrilla warfare, for Fanon, was a moral imperative for the colonized subject.[19] Cuban guerrilla leader Che Guevera wrote in 1963, "The guerrilla is the combat vanguard of the people, situated in a specified place in a certain region, armed and willing to carry out a series of warlike actions for the one possible strategic end—the

seizure of power."[20] Black Nationalist thinkers in the United States drew upon a wide range of thinkers and fighters to bring form and shape to the black experience in America.

Like all fantasies of national identity, Black Nationalism has been subject to a number of important criticisms that highlight its limitations for political practice. Hannah Arendt critiques a politics so dependent on violence as an engine of social change. She writes, "Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power's disappearance."[21] Distinguishing between violence and power, she argues that while the former can *destroy* the latter, violence can never *create* power. Thus, a politics whose analysis is so constrained by the exercise of violence will likely only succeed in creating a more violent world. Angela Davis has also noted a pronounced misogynistic tendency in many Black Nationalisms, something they undoubtedly have in common with much gangsta rap.[22] Finally, Ahmed Shawki convincingly argues that tendencies of Black Nationalism are plagued by the very central contradiction of all nationalist fantasies: class antagonism. To posit a fundamental solidarity between people of African descent is to obscure very real structural disparities within an economically stratified people and foreclose possibilities for class-based interracial struggle.[23]

Black Nationalism and Third World radicalism are, of course, the stuff of book-length projects.[24] I am less interested in this project in a comprehensive treatment of the tradition than in providing an intellectual framework for contextualizing the cataclysmic cultural intervention of N.W.A. within the discursive domain of racialized criminality in 1988. For such an analysis, I broadly understand Black Nationalism as a fantasy of racialized subjectivity that imagines African Americans as part of a coherent national identity that transcends traditional borders and engages in an epic confrontation with the colonizing forces of white supremacy. Black Nationalism prescribes autonomous modes

of world-building that enable the colonized subject to both survive and constitute her or himself outside of the colonizer's grasp. Those colonizers might be the literal occupants of a national territory or those who manage the levers of the prison-industrial complex. Hill Collins notes Black Nationalism's "versatility to have diverse meanings for segments of African American civil society distinguished by social class, color, gender, immigrant status, and religion."[25] It is a malleable fantasy that can be deployed to constitute a people. As street gang scholar Alejandro Alonso and others have noted, early street gangs in Los Angeles initially sought to continue the nationalist traditions of the BPP before succumbing to internal strife, inter-gang warfare, and narco-economics.[26] Thus, nationalism and street gangs, which provided so much of the material and discursive foundation of gangsta rap, have been intertwined from their inception. Whatever form it takes, a black nation is imagined as an alternative to social arrangements that are oppressive and exploitative. In order to clarify how N.W.A. functioned as self-fashioned guerrillas wielding the mark of criminality to construct a fantasy resembling a black nation, I now turn to the role of Black Nationalism in the growth of hip-hop.

BLACK NATIONALISM IN THE HIP-HOP NATION

As I have already noted, hip-hop emerged as a coherent form of African American vernacular expression at precisely the same time the Black Power movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s began to wane.[27] A combination of law enforcement infiltration and capital flight forged significant class-based rifts in the African American community, creating a relatively successful African American middle-class and an impoverished urban population of working class and poor blacks.[28] It is from this latter population that hip-hop developed.

The political thought of Black Nationalism has had a longstanding impact on African American cultural expression. According to Watkins, the role of artistic production in the constitution of black political consciousness became a topic of sustained discussion and debate in the mid and late 1960s.[29] This, of course, is not to suggest that there was *no* relationship between Black Nationalism and African American culture before this golden era.[30] However, the palpable atmosphere of racial politics during the 1960s made intersections between art and politics not only inevitable, but also *profitable*. Artists like James Brown and Stevie Wonder began incorporating nationalist themes into their work during the 1960s and 1970s with great commercial success. Furthermore, as white Americans became less willing to donate money to civil rights organizations, the movement increasingly looked to successful black artists for revenue.[31] As Young notes, discourses of Black Nationalism enabled activists and artists to describe "local concerns in more urgent, compelling, and specific terms."[32] Thus, the inner city could be imagined as a colony and its inhabitants the colonized. Furthermore, the poor and working class blacks who occupied disadvantaged urban areas could imagine themselves—through the consumption of music, film, and other sites of nationalist discourse—as members of a transcontinental African nation.[33]

Hip-hop has a longstanding and complex relationship to Black Nationalism. The musical foundation of hip-hop, DJing, has its origins in Jamaica by way of Clive "DJ Kook Herc" Campbell. Herc was inspired by the street parties of Kingston, which gave rise to innovative DJs who used massive sound systems and dubbing techniques to whip crowds into a frenzy and help give form and shape to Jamaica's traumatized national consciousness. Reggae was itself heavily influenced by the Garvey-inspired religious tradition of Rastafari.[34] Upon immigrating to the South Bronx, Herc helped launch an entire culture of block parties where DJs spun and mixed records, break-dancers

accompanied them, and graffiti artists adorned fliers and venues with their subversive artwork. This import of a popular and politically charged Jamaican tradition would, according to Chang, "become a diagram for hip-hop music."[35]

The party scene in the Bronx, itself, emerged in a time of political upheaval. As the Bronx became isolated by Robert Moses's city planning, a once diverse and thriving working class neighborhood became economically depressed and increasingly occupied by warring street gangs—just as Herc's native Jamaica.[36] DJing and rapping, as well as graffiti and break dancing, functioned as creative outlets in the absence of sufficient resources for arts programs in Bronx schools.[37] The nationalist politics at the heart of Jamaican cultural traditions, as well as the residue of the Black Power movement still occupying the streets of New York and other urban centers, gave early rap music a decidedly nationalist character. Most notably, rap pioneer Kevin "Afrika Bambaataa" Donovan, a former gang member, formed the "Organization," which he later called the Zulu Nation, after the legendary African tribe. Emerging in the mid-1970s and inspired by Bambaataa's travels to Africa, Zulu Nation sought to harness the organizing potential of the emerging hip-hop scene to steer inner-city youth away from street gangs.[38] By structuring the expressions of hip-hop culture within the fantasy structure of a nation, Bambaataa attempted to replace damaging social formations with more promising ones. Indeed, gangsta rap was by no means hip-hop's first engagement with street gangs, as the two have been intimately intertwined from the former's inception.

As the Sugarhill Gang, Run DMC, LL Cool J, the Beastie Boys and others rose to commercial success, rap music continually confronted the burden of speaking to the very real anxieties of poor and working class African Americans. The group that most readily accepted this burden of representation was Public Enemy. Although rap acts like Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five produced socially relevant songs like "The

Message," Public Enemy helped elevate the art of political rap music to an unprecedented stature of relevance and commercial success. Informed by Black Nationalism and outraged by what the past decade wrought on the African American community, Public Enemy forged a body of work that was both incendiary and popular. Their classic "Fight the Power," which director Spike Lee featured in his controversial film *Do the Right Thing*, became an iconic anthem of black inner-city grievances during the Reagan and Bush years.[39] Their controversial 1989 track "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos" portrayed a prison riot led by front man Chuck D, while "By the Time I Get to Arizona" constituted a revenge fantasy against states that refused to recognize Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday as a holiday. In addition to performing politically charged songs, Public Enemy deployed numerous images associated with Black Nationalism in their concerts and music videos, including the trademark red, blue, and green colors of the UNIA, as well as prominent pictures of major nationalist figures like Malcolm X and Angela Davis.[40] Along with rappers like KRS-One and Sister Souljah, Public Enemy sustained a vibrant, political tendency in hip-hop during the 1980s and early 1990s largely informed by the traditions of Black Nationalism. Many in the black community—particularly intellectuals and veterans of the Civil Rights era—began to take hip-hop seriously as a potentially resistant, even emancipatory force.[41] However, while message hip-hop was ascending on the East Coast, a very different story was unfolding on the other side of the country.

Many scholars have argued that gangsta rap and Black Nationalisms are at odds with one another. Robin D.G. Kelley notes that many Los Angeles-based rappers, including N.W.A. members Eric "Eazy-E" Wright and O'Shea "Ice Cube" Jackson, were highly critical of Black Nationalism, believing its preoccupations with Africa took necessary attention away from the plight of inner city African Americans.[42] Davarian

Baldwin echoes Kelley, writing that, with the ascent of gangsta, "The political language of nation-conscious rap, in its most general sense, was traded in for the grammar of the hood and the particular day-to-day struggles of black people."[43] Furthermore, Paul Gilroy speculates that the 'hood's specificity works against a nationalist politics because it is not "exportable" to sectors outside its spatial constraints.[44] Yet, I agree with Forman's claim that "Through recognition of shared conditions across the nation, the depressed environment of the 'hood emerges as a common spatial symptom of a larger systemic decay that has had an inordinate impact on black and Latino populations."[45] In other words, a specific "'hood," like Compton, might function as synecdoche for broader struggles associated with black and brown life in America. This is not to ignore the very real, and often violent, tensions associated with regional rivalries in rap (an issue I interrogate in subsequent chapters), but to suggest that within gangsta discourses exist the potential for articulating the specific gangsta fantasy to a broader terrain of struggle. Gangsta need not be read as an *anti-nationalist* discourse, but, as Baldwin suggests, "a shift in the way in which politics is articulated."[46]

Eazy-E and the founding of N.W.A.

In the early 1980s, rap artists like Ice-T, Boogie Down Productions, and the Beastie Boys began including themes related to crime in their recordings. However, no group played a larger role in solidifying the status of gangsta rap as a genre in hip-hop than N.W.A. After several years of making a living through small-time drug dealing, Eazy-E decided to put his money and energy toward starting a record company. Founded in 1987 by Eazy and N.W.A. manager Jerry Heller, Ruthless Records provided a space for Eazy to begin assembling local rap talents into a "South Central supergroup." He eventually recruited rappers Ice Cube and Lorenzo "MC Ren" Patterson, as well as

producers Andre "Dr. Dre" Young and Antoine "DJ Yella" Carraby.[47] Other than Eazy, none of the young men in the group had lived a life of crime or even abject poverty. Rather, all of them, Eazy included, came from middle class backgrounds. Ice Cube, for example, was bussed to a suburban high school and earned a degree in architectural drafting from the Phoenix Institute of Technology in Arizona. However, as both Chang and Quinn correctly note, the mere fact that N.W.A.'s lived experiences did not perfectly correspond with the yarns they weaved in their songs does not justify dismissing their rhetoric as simple opportunism or posturing. All five original members lived in close physical proximity to the gangs, drugs, and violence that were compromising their neighborhoods. Even if they had not seen the inside of a prison cell, taken part in a drive-by, or any of the other deeds they valorized in their records, they undoubtedly knew people who had.[48] To be African American at the end of the 20th Century was to be implicated by the mark of criminality regardless of one's immediate material relationship to the prison-industrial complex. Thus, while N.W.A.'s claims to authenticity are suspect, they are not altogether fictive.

Before releasing *Straight Outta Compton* in 1988, Compton-based N.W.A. released the 11-track *N.W.A. and the Posse*. Less a coherent album than a collection of tracks produced by those affiliated with N.W.A., the recording anticipated the cultural force of the album to follow. Tracks such as "8-Ball," "A Bitch Iz a Bitch," "L.A. Is the Place," and "Dope Man" coalesced to articulate a gangsta ethos grounded in crime, hypermasculinity, and fidelity to South Central Los Angeles as a site of community and agency. The album's most iconic single was "Boyz-N-The-Hood," which was penned by Ice Cube and performed by Eazy-E. Much of the track—which is rapped over a relatively simple drum machine beat—exemplifies the troubling themes of leisure that came to typify popular gangsta rap. Consider the third verse:

> Bored as hell and I wanna get ill/So I went to a place where my homeboys chill/The fellows out there, making that dollar/I pulled up in my 6-4 Impala/They greet me with a 40 and I started drinking/And from the 8-ball my breath start stinking/Love to get my girl, to rock that body/Before I left I hit the Bacardi/Went to her house to get her out of the pad/Dumb hoe says something stupid that made me mad/She said somethin' that I couldn't believe/So I grabbed the stupid bitch by her nappy ass weave/She started talkin' shit, wouldn't you know?/Reached back like a pimp and slapped the ho/Her father jumped out and he started to shout/So I threw a right-cross cold knocked him out.

A brief sample of Jean Knight's famous 1971 release "Mr. Big Stuff" suggests that Eazy-E and his gang make no apologies about their hubris and hedonism. It is as if the track is an unambiguous response to Knight's rhetorical question of "who do you think you are?" Eazy-E is a boy from the hood and, as the song's chorus suggests, "the boyz 'n tha hood are always hard."

However, as Jeff Chang insightfully explains in his reading of "Boyz-N-The Hood," the song is not without political content. Specifically, Chang highlights a lyrical homology to a particularly iconic moment in the history of Black Nationalist politics. The final verse of "Boyz-N-The Hood" describes a courtroom shoot-out:

> I went to get them out but there was no bail/The fellaz start to riot in the county jail/Two days later in municipal court/Kilo G on trial cold cut a fart/Disruption of a court, said the judge/On a six-year sentence my man didn't budge/Bailiff came over to turn him in/Kilo G looked up and gave a grin/He yelled out "FIRE!" then came Suzy/The bitch came in with a sub-machine Uzi/Police shot the bitch but didn't hurt her/Both up state for attempted murder.

Chang notes that this scene is astonishingly similar to a 1971 incident in a Marin County, California courtroom, where Jonathan Jackson, the younger brother of prisoner and Black Panther George Jackson, forcefully entered a courtroom, temporarily freeing three San Quentin prisoners and taking five hostages, including a judge. Jackson demanded the release of his brother and his incarcerated allies. However, the standoff ended tragically with four deaths, including the judge and Jackson.[49] This violent affair—a guerrilla

insurrection of sorts—reached mythical status within the Black Power movement, partially because Angela Davis stood accused of supplying the younger Jackson with weapons and her trial became a central rallying point for Black Nationalists and other activists.[50]

It is this homology, or formal parallel, between the Black Nationalist struggles of the 1970s, largely waged within and against the prison-industrial complex, and the early raps of N.W.A. that sets the stage for my analysis of *Straight Outta Compton*.[51] In the following reading of their album, I consider the ways they construct this nationalist fantasy toward the constitution of an affirmative urban space by, first, inverting the spatial power dynamics of South Central Los Angeles and, second, appropriating the prerogative of violence from law enforcement as a mode of cultural warfare. While I draw from the entire album, as well as the music videos associated with it, I pay particularly close attention to the tracks "Straight Outta Compton," "Gangsta, Gangsta," and, most crucially, "F--- Tha Police."

RECONFIGURING THE BLACK CRIMINAL SUBJECT IN N.W.A.'S *COMPTON*

Gangsta rap did not introduce the United States to South Central Los Angeles any more than it invented the notion of the violent black criminal. Rather, a mixture of sensationalistic popular culture and divisive political rhetoric created a national climate where the inner city in general, and Los Angeles, in particular, dominated the fears and curiosities of many American citizens during the 1980s. By 1988, the "War on Drugs" had evolved into a national law enforcement initiative. Los Angeles functioned as a material and discursive epicenter for this moral panic associated with the crack economy, gangs, and violence.[52] Movies like Dennis Hopper's *Colors*, and television series like *America's Most Wanted* and *COPS* created a mass mediated caricature of black urban life

in America, placing crime and violence front and center with little regard for nuance.[53] Mainstream politicians, most notably incoming President George H.W. Bush, staked their political careers on being "tough on crime."[54] Mike Davis notes that even respected black politicians in Los Angeles came to endorse the draconian anti-drug and anti-gang policies of the LAPD.[55] Compton and its neighboring cities were hegemonically represented as centers of ravenous violence and epidemic drug circulation. In true colonial fashion, politicians and law enforcement assumed the "White Man's Burden" of rescuing the ghetto from itself.[56]

In her study of gangsta rap, Eithne Quinn argues that a great irony of the genre is that, from its inception, it has not differed dramatically from mainstream media. Like the tabloid popular and political culture that came to represent black urban life, Quinn writes, "rappers transformed often mundane, unglamorous urban life into gripping action-packed melodrama."[57] N.W.A. did nothing less with Compton and, subsequently, the totality of South Central Los Angeles. Obviously, life in Compton during the 1980s did not consist *entirely* of sex, guns, and drugs. However, N.W.A. centralized these components to create a composite fantasy of Los Angeles that not only declared the supremacy of Compton to the rest of Los Angeles County, but sent a message to the dominant New York hip-hop scene that the cultural balance of power was about to shift West. As Forman argues, "[Compton was] interpolated as a bounded civic space that provides both specificity and scale for the communication of a West Coast rap presence."[58] Such a rendering of Compton was also, of course, an incredibly marketable fantasy for N.W.A.

Quinn is also careful to note that although gangsta rap partakes in sensationalistic fantasies similar to those of *America's Most Wanted* and mainstream politicians, its artists assume oppositional forms of audience identification.[59] While mainstream culture appealed to the prototypical white suburban nuclear family that required state protection

from an always-already racialized criminal threat, *gangsta spoke from the perspective of that very threat*. For example, in the first verse of the third track from *Straight Outta Compton*, "Gangsta, Gangsta," Ice Cube raps over a sample of funk artist Steve Arrington's "Weak at the Knees":

> Here's a little somethin' 'bout a nigga like me/Never shoulda been let out the penitentiary/Ice Cube would like ta say/That I'm a crazy muthafucka from around the way/Since I was a youth, I smoked weed out/Now I'm the muthafucka that ya read about/Takin' a life or two/That's what the hell I do, /You don't like how I'm livin'/Well fuck you!

The notion of a racialized, pathological criminal figure that never should have been released from prison, lest he commit more crimes, resonates strongly with the tough-on-crime political climate coinciding with the album's 1988 release. However, this is a heroic figure in the hands of N.W.A. Indeed, Cube *is* "the muthafucka that ya read about." Where the stories of the mainstream media are those of moral panic, Cube partakes in constructing an affirmative, if still problematic, fantasy of black subjectivity.

Similarly, the album's opening track, "Straight Outta Compton," provides several verses in which respective N.W.A. members boast about their criminal exploits. In the first verse, Cube proclaims,

> Straight outta Compton, crazy motherfucker named Ice Cube/From the gang called Niggaz With Attitudes/When I'm called off, I got a sawed off/Squeeze the trigger, and bodies are hauled off/You too, boy, if ya fuck with me/The police are gonna hafta come and get me/Off yo' ass, that's how I'm goin' out/For the punk motherfuckers that's showin' out/Niggaz start to mumble, they wanna rumble/Mix 'em and cook 'em in a pot like gumbo/Goin' off on a motherfucker like that/With a gat that's pointed at yo' ass.

He adds, "Here's a murder rap to keep yo' dancin'/With a crime record like Charles Manson." Cube, in other words, imagines himself as California's new "crazy motherfucker" *par excellence*, replacing the legendary figure of Manson as the state's most iconic criminal figure. In the following verse, MC Ren raps,

> Straight outta Compton, another crazy ass nigga/More punks I smoke, yo', my rep gets bigger/I'm a bad motherfucker and you know this/But the pussy ass niggaz don't show this/But I don't give a fuck, I'm a make my snaps/If not from the records, from jackin' the crops/Just like burglary, the definition is "jackin'"/And when illegally armed it's called "packin'"/Shoot a motherfucker in a minute/I find a good piece o' pussy, I go up in it/So if you're at a show in the front row/I'm a call you a bitch or dirty-ass ho/You'll probably get mad like a bitch is supposed to/But that shows me, slut, you're composed to/A crazy muthafucker from tha street/Attitude legit cause I'm tearin' up shit/MC Ren controls the automatic/For any dumb muthafucker that starts static/Not the right hand cause I'm the hand itself /Every time I pull a AK off the shelf.

Ren's intervention in this homage to Compton makes more explicit the track's hyperbolic elements that might have been less evident in Ice Cube's more forthrightly violent passage. Ren transitions seamlessly between portrayals of inner city violence ("Shoot a motherfucker in a minute") and flagrant misogyny ("I find a good piece o' pussy, I go up in it"), and boasts about his proficiency as a rapper ("But I don't give a fuck, I'm a make my snaps/If not from the records, from jackin' the crops"). Read alongside Cube's verse and within the broader thematic of West Coast ethos within hip-hop and the black vernacular tradition in general, it becomes apparent that these violent episodes might best be understood as metaphors for artistic credibility.[60] Ren does not *literally* brandish an AK-47 anymore than Cube intends to point a gat at anyone's "ass." Instead, these ambitious young artists are employing the mark of criminality, those inartistic proofs associated with racialized criminality that have so saturated black subjectivity within the United States, to assert their credibility as rap musicians. It is a fantasy of virtuosity written with the guns, drugs, and sex of the very Compton the United States had already come to know. N.W.A.'s Compton, however, is a site and source of agency—it has the makings of a nation.

However, N.W.A.'s own rhetoric works against this singular reading of *Straight Outta Compton*. To be sure, hip-hop in general, and gangsta rap in particular, contain

rampant boasting and "dissing" of competing artists.[61] Yet, the members of N.W.A. were also self-styled "street reporters" who believed they were bringing the rest of the world an accurate picture of life in the ghetto.[62] Of course as Quinn and others rightfully note, they also helped begin a now very lucrative tradition of *selling* this distorted picture of the ghetto.[63] Nonetheless, within N.W.A.'s *corpus* is a strong sense that the content of their work reproduces "real life" on the streets of Compton. For example, "Gangsta, Gangsta" begins with the sound of a police siren and a man complaining that the black gangsters in the neighborhood are "at it again" and wonders, "who they fucked up this time." He is answered by screeching car tires and Eazy-E declaring, "YOU, MOTHERFUCKA!" before unloading an automatic weapon into the miffed bystander.

It is difficult to overstate the audacity of valorizing the murder of a bystander in an urban setting during the late 1980s. As Robert Reinhold reported in a 1988 *New York Times*,

> Gang warfare and initiation rites, which have taken the lives of numerous gang members as well as innocent bystanders, are a fact of life in Los Angeles, especially in poor black neighborhoods. The killings were little noticed by the city at large until early February when a young woman strolling in the affluent Westwood area—which, with its 10 movie houses, is L.A.'s main entertainment center—was caught in a gunfight between two rival black youths.[64]

However, he also adds, "While deploring the killing, many blacks were bitter that until gang terror had spread to a white neighborhood, scant attention was paid to the carnage."[65] By turning his guns on the spectator, Eazy-E effectively assassinates the mainstream suburban gaze, chastising those who stare at Compton from afar, decrying rampant crime and violence while having no immediate connection to the area and its people. This moment, coupled with others on the album that jealously protect the authenticity associated with Compton, constitutes a confrontation with dominant fantasies of black criminality, seeking to erase them in order to make room for new ones. In a

fashion astonishingly resonant with Fanon's writings on violence, it represents the erasure of the settler's world in order to make room for the native's.[66]

The question of knowledge and immediate connection to Compton and the rest of Los Angeles is a salient theme throughout *Straight Outta Compton*. For example, Dr. Dre begins the album's opening title track with the declaration, "You are now about to witness the strength of street knowledge." Dre's statement portends the group's repeated public statements that the members of N.W.A. were "street reporters" projecting the mayhem of Los Angeles onto the public screen.[67] But he also significantly asserts the *strength* of this knowledge. He is advancing a subject position emanating from an experiential connection to Compton and other sectors of Los Angeles County. Those who occupy the spatial terrain of the inner city are in a position of power in this album, just as the native guerrilla who knows the land far better than the armed colonizer. While they may be sources of fear and trepidation for the mainstream, it is that fearsome aura that gives them their power. As Quinn's analysis suggests, the raw material of this "street knowledge" is not remarkably different from mainstream configurations of the inner city. Young black men donning dark clothes, gold chains, heavy weaponry, and hypersexuality are the stuff of dominant fantasies of racialized criminality. However, N.W.A. offers a fundamentally different fantasy of the embedded urban warrior parading triumphantly through the streets of Compton, mocking, if not violently eliminating, the outsider.

The fantasy construction taking place in *Straight Outta Compton* also represents a dialogue with the rest of the hip-hop nation. In a telling sample of "message" rap group Boogie Down Productions's track "My Philosophy," the chorus of "Gangsta, Gangsta" declares, "It's not about a salary, it's all about reality." In the original track, rapper KRS-One leveled a pointed critique against the music industry and its commodification of black stereotypes associated with crime and consumption (i.e. "That's why I walk with

my head up/When I hear wack rhymes I get fed up"). In "Gangsta, Gangsta," N.W.A. responds to KRS-One and his New York-based Boogie Down Productions, insisting that the urgencies of inner-city life offer little time for philosophizing. Rather, one can hold his head high while brandishing weaponry and committing crimes. In the first verse of the song, Cube asks the loaded question, "Do I look like a mutha fuckin' role model?" He adds, "To a kid lookin' up to me/Life ain't nothin' but bitches and money." Where KRS-One, Public Enemy, and other political rappers sought to free the minds of the people through rhetorics of Black Nationalism and empowerment, N.W.A. prescribed a healthy dose of "reality," albeit their version thereof. The boldest form of resistance for the young black subject in this representation of Compton was to embrace the very elements of the 'hood that had produced so much moral panic within the modern body politic and employ it toward affirmative ends, whether that be through cultural production or criminal activity. I agree with Quinn's argument that an underlying fantasy that drove N.W.A. and other gangsta artists is a fundamental fidelity to the American Dream. Individual success is the chief imperative here, and N.W.A.'s *modus operandi* was the enlistment of the mark of criminality. Street knowledge, like an AK-47, is a tool for N.W.A.'s black criminal subject.

Fidelity to Compton corresponds with another important dimension of hip-hop culture: authenticity. As Ogbar, notes, an artist's connection to criminality is a significant source of gangsta authenticity, ranging from her or his (but most often his) time spent in jail, number of crimes committed, and connection to specific neighborhood.[68] As Forman rigorously documents, N.W.A. helped launch a legion of rap artists who proclaimed their connection to Compton.[69] In one of the album's later tracks, "Compton's 'n the House," Dr. Dre complains,

> Speakin' of Compton, it's makin' me sick (why?)/Everybody'z talkin' that crazy shit/Sayin' they were raised in the CPT (aha)/Just as I was, they try to be like me/Poppin' that shit, get the fuck out my face/Knowin' that they never even seen the place/Claimin' my city is my city they claim/Mothafuckaz we're about to put some salt in your game.[70]

So powerful is the ethos associated with place that these rappers are quick to "call out" those who falsely lay claim to it. Most relevant for considering N.W.A.'s work within the thematic of criminality is the dominant reading of Compton and surrounding areas that typified so much of mainstream discourse at the time. N.W.A. is engaged in a symbolic spatial reversal of Compton as a site of profound pride, even as it is a source of fear from those who exist outside its borders. Working within the same system of marks that have so vilified Compton to the mainstream, N.W.A. reconstitutes the city as a site of cultural production, sexuality, and warfare. It is a fantasy that stands as both an affront to those of the hegemonic imagination and the source of a new subject position for inner city black youth.

Meeting the settler's violence in "F---- tha Police"

While *Straight Outta Compton* was, in its totality, an influential and controversial album in the history of the hip-hop nation, it is the record's second track, "F--- Tha Police" that generated by far the most public deliberation and institutional response. Described as a "revenge fantasy" by Ice Cube, the song engages much of the same themes I outline above, particularly an affirmative view of the ghetto and black subjectivity, as well as the intertwining of criminal discourses with artistic boasting.[71] However, N.W.A. structures these themes around a pointed critique of the criminal justice system and, most crucially for public commentary on the song, the murder of police officers. The track, read alongside others on the album, constitutes a rhetorical contestation, albeit a problematic one, of law enforcement's prerogative of violence,

which amounts to an urban nationalist discourse levied against a colonizing prison-industrial complex. It is a fantasy where the members of N.W.A. function as a guerrilla vanguard purging Compton of its unwelcome occupiers in blue.

The police loom large as villains in *Straight Outta Compton*. For instance, the music video for the title track portrays a chase scene of the LAPD pursuing N.W.A. through the streets of Compton. While police chase scenes are nothing new in the domain of popular culture, N.W.A. inverts the dynamic of these chases to posit the officer as an invader in the group's urban home. The opening of the video cuts between images of N.W.A. rapping directly to the camera and Los Angeles police officers scheming over maps of Compton as they plan an apparent sweep of the city. LAPD Police Chief Daryl Gates, of course, turned such sweeps into public spectacles that ensnared thousands of young blacks in the criminal justice system.[72] The camera also highlights the economic depression that saturated Compton at the time, including boarded storefronts and quick zoom shots on bail bond and crisis centers. One of the closing shots of the video reveals that Compton's library and courthouse are adjacent to one another, highlighting how regimes of crime and punishment implicate even allegedly sacred, pedagogical spaces. While the lyrics of "Straight Outta Compton" primarily amount to boasts articulated through the mark of criminality, the track's video creates a juxtaposition between image and text that facilitates a far more critical reading. N.W.A.'s Compton—just as that experienced by black youth of the era—is a militarized and criminalized zone.

By the second verse, rapped by MC Ren, the cruising police officers have spotted N.W.A. and their posse on a street corner and a chase ensues. Although the young men attempt to outrun the officers, they are eventually caught, cuffed, and placed inside a paddy wagon. However, as the video enters the third verse, we realize that Eazy-E was

not among the arrested and he quickly comes to the rescue. Riding alongside the paddy wagon in a convertible, Eazy raps,

> Dangerous motherfucker raises hell/And if I ever get caught I make bail/See, I don't give a fuck, that's the problem/I see a motherfuckin' cop I don't dodge him/But I'm smart, lay low, creep a while/And when I see a punk pass, I smile/To me it's kinda funny, the attitude showin' a nigga drivin'/But don't know where the fuck he's going, just rollin'/Lookin' for the one they call Eazy/But here's a flash, they never seize me/Ruthless! Never seen like a shadow in the dark/Except when I unload, see I'll get over the hesitation/And hear the scream of the one who got the last penetration.

After Eazy's taunting exchange with the officer driving the paddy wagon, an external shot of the police vehicle reveals that N.W.A. is inexplicably back outside and free, as if Eazy's stealth rhyming had liberated them. The music video, in effect, rearticulates the relationship between the 'hood and law enforcement (the guerrilla and the settler), constructing a fantasy in which rhymes might be deployed as weapons against cops. Indeed, the fantasies of this album are nothing less than a discursive tool of resistance against dominant fantasies that cast police officers as noble protectors. In N.W.A.'s Compton, they are outsiders to be slain and expunged by a criminal vanguard.

On the track "Express Yourself," Dr. Dre continues the group's conflation of artistic ability and criminal activity, explaining, "I'm expressin' with my full capabilities/And now I'm livin' in correctional facilities/Cause some don't agree with how I do this." The video alternates between Dre and other members of N.W.A. walking through the streets of Compton, interacting with members of the community and rapping to the camera, and a chronicle of black men's relationship to the criminal justice system, beginning with a plantation and ending with Dre's death by electric chair. Throughout the video, the same middle-aged white man portrays the plantation guard, police officer, and executioner. While reducing the historical trajectory of American racist past to a single

white male may lack complexity, it nonetheless highlights continuity between different modes of institutional oppression. The song and video wed black vernacular expression to the broader trajectory of criminality, a move that permeates the entirety of *Straight Outta Compton*.

In both "Straight Outta Compton" and "Express Yourself," police officers represent a force working *against* fantasies of black autonomy and creativity. "F--- Tha Police" continues this critique of law enforcement but raises the ante by centralizing police officers as the focus of N.W.A.'s lyrical ire and violent fantasizing. The track begins by setting the courtroom scene, delivered over horns sampled from Marva Whitney's "It's My Thing," that will structure the entire song. MC Ren begins by announcing, "Right about now, N.W.A. court is in full effect/Judge Dre presiding/In the case of N.W.A. vs. the Police Department;/Prosecuting attorneys are: MC Ren, Ice Cube, /And Eazy-motherfuckin-E." Dre then "enters the courtroom" and declares, "Order, order, order/Ice Cube, take the motherfuckin' stand/Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth/And nothin' but the truth so help your black ass?" Cube responds with an affirmative, "You god damn right!" before Dre invites him to "tell everybody what the fuck you gotta say!" Cube then lays into the incendiary verbiage that would light a cultural fuse:

> Fuck the police comin' straight from the underground/A young nigga got it bad cause I'm brown/And not the other color so police think/They have the authority to kill a minority/Fuck that shit, cause I ain't the one/For a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun/To be beaten' on, and thrown in jail/We can go toe to toe in the middle of a cell/Fuckin' with me cause I'm a teenager/With a little bit of gold and a pager/Searchin' my car, lookin' for the product/Thinkin' every nigga is sellin' narcotics

These initial lines might seem unexceptional to anyone observing criminal politics and hip-hop culture during the 1980s. Police officers in Los Angeles were complicit in

constitutionally dubious sweeps of minority neighborhoods, as well as a longstanding reputation for brutality against young African Americans.[73] Such a politically explicit rap might be found on a Public Enemy record, given its unambiguous critique of law enforcement discrimination. In fact, influential songs such as Stevie Wonder's "Living for the City" and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" contain episodic interludes of black men harassed and detained by police officers, and ultimately sent to jail. Critiquing the prison-industrial complex was nothing new in black popular culture at the end of the 20th Century. However, N.W.A. was not content with critique. "F--- Tha Police" was a song of insurrection.

After his initial analysis of law enforcement transgressions, Cube raises the stakes of his confrontation with the LAPD:

> Beat a police out of shape/And when I'm finished, bring the yellow tape/To tape off the scene of the slaughter/Still getting' swoll off bread and water/I don't know if they fags or what/Search a nigga down, and grabbin' his nuts/And on the other hand, without a gun they can't get none/But don't let it be a black and a white one/Cause they'll slam ya down to the street top/Black police showin' out for the white cop/Ice Cube will swarm/On ANY motherfucker in a blue uniform/Just cause I'm from, the CPT [Compton]/Punk police are afraid of me!/HUH, a young nigga on the warpath/And when I'm finished, it's gonna be a bloodbath/Of cops, dyin' in L.A./Yo Dre, I got somethin' to say.

Images of yellow tape are, of course, commonplaces in dominant fantasies of criminality. In popular cinema and television crime dramas, they mark scenes of ghastly crimes that heroic police officers intend to solve and prosecute. But in Cube's hands, the yellow tape denotes a scene of righteous vengeance. He also castrates an otherwise hypermasculine law enforcement community, equating search methods with homoerotic desire via homophonic epithets, and suggesting that absent their access to state sanctioned tools of violence, these cops "can't get none." Cube is also careful to identify black police officers as "Uncle Tom" figures doing the bidding of a white supremacist law

enforcement infrastructure at the expense of their native community. Through an interplay of violent imagery, homophobia, and racial politics, Cube constitutes law enforcement officers as violent, invasive colonizers deserving of the most violent retribution. His is a fantasy of the "'hood" as a site to be protected from invaders.

As the track continues, MC Ren and Eazy-E join Cube's diatribe against the LAPD. Ren raps,

> Fuck the police and Ren said it with authority/Because the niggaz on the street is a majority/A gang, is with whoever I'm steppin'/And the motherfuckin' weapon is kept in/A stash box, for the so-called law/Wishin' Ren was a nigga that they never saw/Lights start flashin' behind me/But they're scared of a nigga so they mace me to blind me/But that shit don't work, I just laugh/Because it gives 'em a hint, not to step in my path/For police, I'm sayin', "Fuck you punk!"/Readin' my rights and shit, it's all junk/Pullin' out a silly club, so you stand/With a fake-assed badge and a gun in your hand/But take off the gun so you can see what's up/And we'll go at it punk, and I'm-a-fuck you up!/Make you think I'm-a-kick your ass/But drop your gat, and Ren's gonna blast/I'm sneaky as fuck when it comes to crime/But I'm-a-smoke 'em now and not next time/Smoke any motherfucker that sweats me/Or any asshole, that threatens me/I'm a sniper with a hell of a scope/Takin' out a cop or two, they can't cope with me.

In addition to echoing Cube's desire to brutalize police officers with his savvy shooting skills, Ren posits a dynamic that is central to the song's overall political content, as well as the very project of Black Nationalism. His declaration that "the niggaz on the street is a majority" accomplishes more than sound statistical argument (indeed, the steady increase in federal funding for police stations during this period hinged on nothing less than the concern that gangs far outnumbered uniformed police).[74] Rather, it echoes a central ethic of Black Nationalism; the belief that people of color in any given colonial setting might find comfort and encouragement in the fact that they outnumber their oppressor. As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell has noted, Black Nationalists discourses are successful precisely because they enable the individual black subject to imagine her or himself as part of a broader and more powerful *nation* that transcends colonial borders.[75]

Patricia Hill Collins writes that the tradition's appeal "may lie in its usefulness to individual African Americans searching for meaning within their everyday lives; [and] in its utility in mobilizing African Americans as a collectivity for quite diverse activities that are not overtly political."[76] Ren's declaration, then, should be read as equipment for living for the inner city African American reckoning with police brutality, racial profiling, and incarceration. By imagining her or himself as part of an urban majority—a gang—the listening youth can work within and re-imagine the mark of criminality, even if with the significant limitations associated with gangsta's many ambivalences.

Like Cube, Ren also highlights the contingency and artificiality of law enforcement authority, noting the cop's "fake-assed badge and a gun in your hand." Elaborating upon this theme Eazy-E joints in with a third verse, rapping,

> Without a gun and a badge, what do ya got?/A sucker in a uniform waitin' to get shot/By me, or another nigga/And with a gat it don't matter if he's smaller or bigger/(Ren: Size ain't shit, he's from the old school fool)/And as you all know, E's here to rule/Whenever I'm rollin', keep lookin' in the mirror/And ears on cue, yo', so I can hear a/Dumb motherfucker with a gun/And if I'm rollin' off the 8, he'll be the one/That I take out, and then get away/While I'm drivin' off laughin' this is what I'll say…

The song then breaks into the chorus of "Fuck tha police!" Eazy suggests that absent a city-issued gun and badge, the prototypical police officer has no authentic authority in the "'hood." Rather, he is an invader rightfully vulnerable to the weaponry and righteous fury of Eazy-E and his crew. Eazy, in effect, aims to expose one fantasy and assert another, replacing the ethical police officer with the savvy gangsta guerrilla.

A song such as "F--- Tha Police" cannot be read apart from the entirety of *Straight Outta Compton*, complete with verses far more concerned with boasts and "disses" than political critique. The track is, indeed, peculiarly unambiguous in its content compared to the raps that cover the rest of the album. Although it is as ambivalent as any

other song on the album, "F--- Tha Police" occupies an important space in N.W.A.'s body of work. The track intervenes at a precise political and cultural moment when most Americans have been exposed to a fantasy of the inner city; one in which law enforcement cleans the streets of drug dealers and violent gangsters. "F--- Tha Police" inverts this dynamic not by refuting the very criminal deeds that George H.W. Bush and other cultural figures crafted policy to supposedly combat, but by re-imagining these deeds as heroic feats of rugged masculinity and artistic mastery, while vilifying the colonizer police officer as an unwanted presence in the streets of Compton. Such was the political content of N.W.A.'s multi-platinum album. The public fallout following the record's release revealed precisely how salient their political intervention would be.

RECLAIMING THE PREROGATIVE OF VIOLENCE

As I have noted, *Straight Outta Compton* entered the cultural scene at a time of significant moral panic surrounding the lyrical content of popular music. Thus, N.W.A. was bound to attract significant levels of public outcry given their epithet-laden lyrics and penchant for violent and hypersexualized imagery. However, *Straight Outta Compton* also attracted an unprecedented level of attention from the law enforcement community, which not only raised a number of salient concerns related to free speech, but highlights the antagonisms at the heart of criminalized discourse in the United States during the 1980s.

Chang notes that a sustained right-wing backlash against N.W.A. began in June 1989. This was the month when the conservative Evangelical Christian organization Focus on the Family publicized "F--- Tha Police" in their newsletter. A steady stream of faxes between police stations across the country followed, as law enforcement officials informed their colleagues of the rap group's incendiary anti-cop lyrics. The leadership of

the Fraternal Order of Police adopted a resolution boycotting the shows of any artist who "advocates assaults on police officers."[77] This gesture made it incredibly difficult for venues hosting N.W.A. to provide security for their shows. Many on and off-duty police officers simply refused to work N.W.A. concerts. In other instances, police came out in uncharacteristically large numbers, creating a palpable climate of intimidation. Venue owners began insisting that N.W.A. refrain from performing "F--- Tha Police," even forcing them to sign contracts to that effect.[78] These tensions between law enforcement and the band intensified on August 6, 1989 when N.W.A. played a show at Detroit's Joe Louis arena. Although they agreed to omit the offensive track from their set list, the group eventually relented in the face of an insistent crowd chanting, "Fuck the police!" No sooner did Dre and Cube open the song, than a legion of uniformed police officers stormed the stage. Although they were unable to arrest the group on location, officials met them at their hotel and detained them in their room.

The law enforcement backlash against N.W.A. reached its boiling point when Milt Ahlerich, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) assistant director for the Office of Public Affairs, sent the following letter to the distributor of *Straight Outta Compton*, Priority Records:

> A song recorded by the rap group N.W.A. on their album entitled *Straight Outta Compton* encourages violence against and disrespect for the law enforcement officer and has been brought to my attention. I understand your company recorded and distributed this album and I am writing to share my thoughts and concerns with you.
>
> Advocating violence and assault is wrong, and we in the law enforcement community take exception to such action. Violent crime, a major problem in our country, reached an unprecedented high in 1988. Seventy-eight law enforcement officers were feloniously slain in the line of duty during 1988, four more than in 1987. Law enforcement officers dedicate their lives to the protection of our citizens, and recordings such as the one from N.W.A. are both discouraging and degrading to these brave, dedicated officers.

> Music plays a significant role in society, and I wanted you to be aware of the FBI's position relative to this song and its message. I believe my views reflect the opinion of the entire law enforcement community.[79]

Groups like the American Civil Liberties Union quickly responded to Ahlerich's letter, claiming it would have a constitutional chilling effect in the music industry. As one member of the organization opined, "[Ahlerich's letter is] designed to get Priority to change its practices, policies and distribution for this record, and that's the kind of censorship by intimidation that the First Amendment doesn't permit."[80]

The FBI's intervention, the first of its kind, raises numerous red flags regarding free expression. However, the letter also highlights a more fundamental dynamic where the intersection between race and criminality is concerned. Particularly telling is Ahlerich's claim that "Advocating violence and assault is wrong." While this may appear a *prima facially* obvious statement, it illustrates a central antagonism between the colonizer and the native that "F--- Tha Police" helps to unearth. Specifically, the question of *whose* violence and assault is wrong haunts Ahlerich's letter. Between each verse in "F--- The Police" are vignettes of N.W.A. members encountering racial profiling and police brutality. For example, the following scene precedes MC Ren's rap:

> Cop: Pull your goddamn ass over right now!
>
> Ren: Aww shit, now what the fuck you pullin' me over for?
>
> Cop: 'Cause I feel like it! Just sit your ass on the curb and shut the fuck up!
>
> Ren: Man, fuck this shit!
>
> Cop: A'ight smart ass, I'm takin' your black ass to jail!

N.W.A. *agrees* that violence and assault are wrong. The question, is *whose* violence and assault? Within the domain of N.W.A.'s Compton, slaying a police officer (or, in some cases, a fellow African American) becomes a heroic act and law enforcement aggression

becomes a crime. It is a reconfiguration of a dominant fantasy of criminal justice in America; that of police officers as brave servants and criminals as violent thugs who must be detained. Ahlerich's letter, *recognizing the significant role music plays in society*, seeks to reclaim the prerogative of violence from N.W.A. and reify dominant notions of racialized justice and law enforcement culture. Indeed, his letter is interested in exalting the sacrifices of those in blue uniforms; the very individuals portrayed as pathological thugs in the song whose name Ahlerich dares not utter. The true threat of "F--- Tha Police," in other words, is not the risk of dead police officers (even Ahlerich acknowledged that he knew of no police deaths inspired by the song), but of those very officers losing their discursive authority to wage righteous violence within America's inner cities.[81]

FINDING A NATION IN COMPTON

In this chapter, I have outlined N.W.A.'s reconstitution of the black criminal subject and the 'hood (articulated through/as Compton) as a within a fantasy of Black Nationalism in their influential album *Straight Outta Compton*. Specifically, I have noted the ways N.W.A. operated within an already existing regime of signifiers—the mark of criminality—and constructed an alternative fantasy of an urban space where young urban criminals became a guerrilla vanguard while retaining their subject position as criminals.

Two rhetorical strategies were at the heart of this fantastical reconstitution. First, N.W.A. rhetorically altered the dynamics of Compton by reimagining the young African American male as an agent of artistic virtuosity, sexual prowess, and affirmative criminal conduct. Second, particularly through the incisive "F--- Tha Police," N.W.A. troubles the prerogative of violence, casting law enforcement officials as brute outsiders and violent inner city youth as righteous warriors. This latter characteristic of the album helped

provoke an unprecedented level of institutional response, highlighting the discursive antagonisms at the heart of the mark of criminality. The controversy surrounding *Straight Outta Compton*, in other words, had far less to do with censorship or authentic fears of physical violence, but represented a matter of competing fantasies drawing from the same discursive resources of crime and violence.

Such an analysis suggests that racialized criminality is, in fact, a malleable subject position that might be enlisted toward a multitude of fantasy constructions. I have already documented the devastating implications of dominant fantasies of race and crime in the United States. The question, then, is what kinds of implications does N.W.A.'s nationalist fantasy hold for anti-prison struggle and broader pursuits of social justice?

First, is Compton a nation? While numerous scholars typically counterpoise gangsta rap to the more lofty nationalisms of groups like Public Enemy, my analysis suggests that while there may be significant differences in content between the two, there are fewer in terms of form and underlying political impulse. First, N.W.A. rhetorically coheres a black subjectivity constructed with the mark of criminality. Compton becomes a malleable space for reimagining the black inner city. Although N.W.A. continues to affirm criminality as a part of daily life in Compton, it becomes a tool in the hand of the African American subject. It functions as a resistant fantasy, allowing the young urban male youth to imagine himself as something other than a target of law enforcement or the ire of the entire nation. This strategy is consistent with Campbell's insight that Black Nationalism derives its appeal from the ability to affirm black subjectivity, as well as Hill Collins's position that nationalist discourses need not be explicitly present in order to help structure a political program.[82] *Straight Outta Compton* represents an interweaving of two preexisting discourses: nationalism and the mark of criminality. It enlists a system of marks to signify upon a longstanding tradition in black vernacular discourse.

But how productive might this nation be? As I have noted, Gilroy worries that Compton or any other specific 'hood may not be "exportable" to other realms of black resistance. To support his claim, he cites New York rapper Tim Dog's 1991 single "F--- Compton" as an indication that "Compton is as foreign to some blacks in New York as Kingston, London, Havana, Lagos, Aswan, or Capetown."[83] Tim Dog opens his famous "diss" with the following verse:

> Oh shit mutherfuckas step to the rear and cheer/'Cause Tim Dog is here/Let's get down to the nitty gritty/And talk about a bullshit city/Talking about niggaz from Compton/They're no comp and they truly ain't stomping/Tim Dog a black man's task/I'm so bad I'll whip Superman's ass/All you suckers that rif on the West Coast/I'll dis and spray your ass like a roach/Ya think you're cool wit your curls and your shades/I'll roll thick and you'll be yelling raid/One hard brother that lives in New York/Where brothers are hard and we don't have to talk/Shut your mouth before we come out stomping/Hey, yo Eazy/Fuck Compton!

Identifying Eazy-E by name, Tim Dog adopts many rhetorical strategies common to the gangsta genre (violence, masculinity, etc.) but toward the end of delegitimizing the genre's epicenter. He also expresses distaste for South Central's gang scene, rapping, "Having that gang war/We want to know what you're fighting for/Fighting over colors/All that gang shit is for dumb muthafuckas." Echoing Gilroy's analysis, Forman argues that Tim Dog's diatribe, "reminds us that otherness can form the grounds for hate, even within the rather narrow cultural formation of hip-hop."[84] Indeed, one of the central limitations of nationalist discourses in general is their capacity to create divisions among those who might otherwise find interests and struggle in common.[85]

To be sure, N.W.A. may be guilty of fracturing the black nation many in hip-hop longed to assemble. As will become evident in subsequent chapters, these geographic divisions have had downright deadly implications.[86] However, *Straight Outta Compton* also, as exemplified through "F--- Compton," helped create the condition of possibility

by which rap artists lay claim to criminalized spaces and re-imagine them in affirmative ways. Through his response to N.W.A., Tim Dog is able to valorize black New York, which is itself inscribed by the mark of criminality and enveloped in dominant fantasies of racialized criminality.[87] Thus, while these clashes—which are frighteningly similar to inter-gang warfare that caused colossal damage to the black community at this time—present a host of problematic implications, they contain an underlying impulse to affirm one's spatial subject position within contemporary capitalism. Furthermore, they draw upon locales that are far more accessible to inner city youth than abstract appeals to nationhood. Both *Straight Outta Compton* and "F--- Compton," in part, constitute a criminalized subjectivity partaking in a symbolic reversal by which a stigmatized locale and vilified populace might be re-imagined. This central characteristic of Compton and other 'hoods in gangsta rap highlight's the condition of possibility for reconstituting excluded communities in new, perhaps even productive ways.

Such an optimistic suggestion in no way ignores the many problematic components of N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton*. In addition to homophobic content I describe above, the album is misogynistic. For example, in "Gangsta, Gangsta," Cube raps,

> When me and my posse stepped in the house/All the punk-ass niggaz start breakin' out/'Cause you know, they know whassup/So we started lookin for the bitches with the big butts/Like her, but she keep cryin'/"I got a boyfriend" Bitch stop lyin'/Dumb-ass hooker ain't nuttin' but a dyke/Suddenly I see, some niggaz that I don't like.

It is, of course, important to locate such content within the ironic domain of the black vernacular. No less a figure than Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has defended similar lyrics when the Florida-based group 2-Live Crew faced criminal charges for their offensive lyrics, arguing that they are not to be taken seriously. However, the fact that a small coalition of

female contemporaries of N.W.A. like Queen Latifah, M.C. Lyte, and Roxanne Shante who specifically sought to challenge damaging discourses about black women in rap music suggests the issue was far from settled among African American cultural producers.[88] Furthermore, scholars such as Angela Davis, bell hooks, and Tricia Rose have also leveled pointed critiques against gangsta's sexist overtones.[89] The politics of gender in gangsta rap are complex and are a matter I engage at several other stages in this project. For now, it is simply necessary to note that the genre's troubled relationship to black women undoubtedly tempers any optimistic reading.

I would also like to return to Quinn's insight that gangsta partakes in projecting an image of the inner city that is neither entirely accurate nor altogether different from mainstream representations.[90] While N.W.A.'s reversal of the central dynamics of hegemonic criminal fantasies in America can be understood as a progressive move, one must still account for the image of blackness the genre projects outward. Because *Straight Outta Compton* was such a source of controversy following its release in 1988, considering its reception by the cultural and political mainstream is, of course, absolutely critical. While conservative cultural warriors and members of the law enforcement community levied predictable assaults on the group, other voices assumed a more sympathetic, but nonetheless problematic posture. For example, the October 1990 *New York Times* wrote, "Gangsta rap reveals the pathology of its creators as well as their skill. It is the music of angry young men obsessed with proving their manhood through combat and sex, and they sound more experienced and comfortable with combat."[91] In June of 1989, the *Boston Globe* lamented, "The government throws brave young police at an epidemic of guns and violence while a lot of kids, more than you really want to know about, play to a tune of murder."[92] Gangsta rap, for these journalists, is a medium for gazing upon the urban black Other. Thus, while Eazy-E and his crew may have instilled

black youth with the capacity to re-imagine their subject positions, even if in ambivalent ways, they also gave a legion of mainstream, largely white, journalists and commentators the illusion of "getting it." Gangsta rap, for these writers, represented a way to better diagnose urban pathologies, rather than fundamentally question the fantasies that structure the American criminal justice system. As Tricia Rose correctly notes, "Americans seem far more interested in being entertained by the compelling portraits of horrible conditions than they are in altering them."[93] Thus, N.W.A.'s own frequent claim that they are "street reporters" showing the rest of the world what street life is like may be more problematic than beneficial.

Finally, the "nation" of Compton falls prey to many of the ambivalences of all forms of nationalism. As Shawki, Anderson, and others argue, nationalist discourses encourage subjects to adopt symbolic modes of identification that may obscure their location within material social structures.[94] This is not to suggest that nationalisms are incapable of encouraging affirmative and productive postures for resistance, but that they eventually confront their own contradictions.[95] In the case of Compton, though N.W.A.'s rendering thereof was derived from the stark material conditions of South Central, their own subject positions relative to the inner city became increasingly less authentic as they and other gangsta artists became millionaires. As Quinn notes, the pursuit of capital is an underlying motivation of the gangsta enterprise, and N.W.A. was no exception.[96] Thus, while *Straight Outta Compton* offered a new fantasy structure for those inscribed with the mark of criminality, it also provided through that fantasy an opportunity for the accumulation of profit and further alienation from the ghetto for a select few young black men from Los Angeles.[97] While the black youth whose lives provided inventional resources for N.W.A. would have certainly benefited from the radical transformation of their criminalized subjectivities, the material interests of the artists became increasingly

dependent on the reification thereof. The perils of industry and profit are topics I engage more deeply in the following chapter. Here, it is simply important to note that all variations of nationhood, whether those looking to Africa or Compton, contain important contradictions that risk obscuring important stratifications between self-appointed vanguards and the subjects they claim to represent.

Disbanding, dispersing, and growing

N.W.A. had a hand in inventing and refining a genre of rap that not only forever altered the hip-hop nation, but also challenged the fantasies of racialized criminality at a political moment that was marked by moral panic. While the album provides important insight into the malleability of criminal discourses, as well as the potential for constituting fantasies that enable criminalized subjects to re-imagine their own precarious subject positions, it carries a legacy fraught with limitations. In addition to enlisting discourses of homophobia and misogyny, *Straight Outta Compton* represents a group of profit-driven young men transforming the spectacle of urban criminality into a commodity.

Shortly after the release and success of *Straight Outta Compton*, Ice Cube left N.W.A. over financial disputes with Eazy-E. His first two solo albums, 1990's *Amerikkka's Most Wanted* and 1991's *Death Certificate* attracted critical acclaim and intense public scrutiny for their typically gangsta content, as well as allegations of anti-Semitism, homophobia, and prejudicial rhetoric against Koreans. Both albums were also more explicitly political than *Straight Outta Compton*, largely due to Cube's growing interest in the Nation of Islam. Perhaps Cube recognized a link between the fantasies of gangsta and the nationalist theology of Louis Farrakhan.[98]

N.W.A. produced two more albums. Following the release of 1991's *Efil4zaggin (Niggaz4Life*), the group disbanded due to financial disagreements between Eazy-E and Dre. Both Ren and Eazy remained with Ruthless records with moderate success. Following his break with N.W.A., Dre and his former bodyguard Marion "Suge" Knight formed the label Death Row Records. Death Row, aside from having obvious articulations to the criminal justice system through its name, helped transform gangsta rap into a coherent industry. In 1992, the label released Dre's classic *The Chronic* to immense success. In addition to placing Death Row firmly on the cultural map, the album also introduced America to a former Los Angeles Crip and rapper named Cordozar Calvin Broadus, Jr., who went by the stage name Snoop Doggy Dogg.[99]

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[1] Fanon 1963, 93.
[2] Chang 2005, 225. Also see Williams 1991.
[3] See Davis 2006.
[4] See G 1990; Gore 1988.
[5] See George 2004; Watkins 2005.
[6] Hill Collins 2006, 82.
[7] Anderson 1991, 6.
[8] I understand the state, here, as the legal mediator between antagonistic classes. See Lenin 1975. For a critique of the materialist theory of the state, see Hardt and Negri 2000.
[9] On rhetorics of nationalism, see Biesecker 2007; Butterworth 2005; Cloud 2004; Hartnett 2002.
[10] See Anderson 1991; Hartnett 2002.
[11] Campbell 1971.
[12] See Kelley 1996; Young 2006.
[13] Robinson 2001, 1.
[14] However, as Cynthia Young notes, others locate the legendary debates between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois as the true advent of Black Nationalism. See Young 2006.
[15] See, for example, Garvey 2004.
[16] See Shawki 2006.
[17] See Davis 2003; Fanon 1963; Jackson 1994; James 1948; King 2004; Young 2006.
[18] Young 2006.
[19] Fanon 1963.
[20] Guevera 1963
[21] Arendt 1972, 155.

[22] Davis 1998. Also see Hill Collins 2006.
[23] Shawki 2006. Black Nationalism became particularly conservative and preoccupied with market-based economic advancement in the 1980s. See Dyson 2001.
[24] See Ogbar 2004; Robinson 2001; Young 2006.
[25] Hill Collins 2006, 76.
[26] Alonso 2004; Chang 2005.
[27] Ogbar 2007; Watkins 2001.
[28] Chang 2005; Davis 2006; Shawki 2006; Watkins 2001.
[29] Watkins 2001.
[30] See Ramsey, Jr. 2003; Francesconi 1986.
[31] Denselow 1989; Goldman 2008; Ramsey, Jr. 2003; Watkins 2001.
[32] Young 2006, 11.
[33] Campbell 1971.
[34] See Chang 2005; Denselow 1989.
[35] Chang 2005.
[36] Ibid.
[37] See Rose 1994.
[38] Chang 2005.
[39] Ibid.
[40] See Watkins 2001.
[41] Chang 2005.
[42] Kelley 1994, 212.
[43] Baldwin 2004, 166.
[44] Gilroy 1998.
[45] Forman 2002, 185.
[46] Baldwin 2004, 166.
[47] Ibid, 300.
[48] Chang 2005; Quinn 2005.
[49] Chang 2005. Also see Jackson 1994.
[50] Young 2006.
[51] For more on rhetorical homologies, see Brummett 1988.
[52] Davis 2006; Reeves and Campbell 1994.
[53] Quinn 2005.
[54] See Jamieson 1992; Provine 2006.
[55] Davis 2006.
[56] On the "White Man's Burden," see Cloud 2004.
[57] Quinn 2005, 75.
[58] Forman 2002, 195.
[59] Quinn 2005.
[60] See Forman 2002; Gates, Jr. 1988.
[61] See, for example, Rose 1994.

[62] See, for example, Mills 1989. Public Enemy's Chuck D has famously said that rap music is the "the CNN of black America." Watkins 2005.
[63] See Quinn2005; Watkins 2005.
[64] Reinhold 1998.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Fanon 1963.
[67] See, for example, Mills 1989.
[68] Ogbar 2007. Also see Forman 2002.
[69] Forman 2002.
[70] Lyrics in parentheses indicate backing "responses" from other N.W.A. members.
[71] Chang 2005.
[72] Davis 2006.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Provine 2006.
[75] Campbell 1971.
[76] Hill Collins 2006, 76.
[77] Neufeld 1989.
[78] Harrington 1989.
[79] Reprinted in Chang 2005.
[80] Harrington 1989.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Campbell 1971; Hill Collins 2006.
[83] Gilroy 1998, 308.
[84] Forman 2002, 206.
[85] See Anderson 1991; Shawki 2006.
[86] See Ibid.
[87] Chang 2005.
[88] See Gates 1988; Pareles 1990; Rose 1994.
[89] For a partial transcript of an interview with Ice Cube and Angela Davis, see Chang 2005. Also see hooks 1994; Rose 1994.
[90] Quinn 2005.
[91] Pareles 1990a.
[92] Barnicle 1989.
[93] Rose 2008.
[94] Anderson 1991; Hartnett 2002; Shawki 2006.
[95] See Young 2006.
[96] Quinn 2005.
[97] See Watts 2004.
[98] Chang 2005.
[99] Chang 2005; Quinn 2005.

Chapter 4: How Now Shall We Live? The Politics of Leisure and Commerce in the G-Funk Era

> The Mayor was dumb, and the Council stood/As if they were changed into blocks of wood,/Unable to move a step, or cry/To the children merrily skipping by.
>
> - Robert Browning, "The Pied Piper of Hamelin: A Child's Story"[1]

> I'm just, you know, relatin' to my people the best way I know; bringing them what they know and what they see out there in the streets, but I'm bringing it to them in a musical way, a way of partying rather than, you know what I'm sayin', through violence. Now they can party their way through their problems.
>
> – Snoop Doggy Dogg[2]

The moral panic surrounding gangsta rap following the release of N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton* helped shape discourses of race and criminality at the end of the 1980s. As I documented in the previous chapter, the struggle over the prerogative of violence *vis-à-vis* the song "F--- Tha Police" constituted nothing less than a struggle of fantasy construction waged with the regime of racialized inscriptions I call the mark of criminality. Tensions between law enforcement and the inner city African Americans continued to rise well into the 1990s, particularly within Los Angeles. It is no exaggeration to argue the City of Angels functioned as synecdoche for the broader trajectory of the law enforcement community's relationship with African Americans in the United States.[3]

The War on Drugs, gang warfare, and the subsequent police state LAPD Chief Daryl Gates helped to implement throughout this period placed Los Angeles at the center of crime politics during the late 1980s and early 1990s. However, no two events solidified Los Angeles's status as a city fraught with racial tensions *vis-à-vis* the criminal justice system than the videotaped beating of black motorist Rodney King by a group of police officers in 1991 and the subsequent uprising in the streets of L.A. following the

acquittal of four of those officers on criminal assault charges one year later.[4] The riots led to a reconfiguration of gang dynamics and police practices in Los Angeles and other cities, as well as a dramatic shift in the character of gangsta rap.

In this chapter, I interrogate the so-called "gangsta funk," or G-funk era of gangsta rap, whose emergence at this crucial time represented gangsta's reckoning with Rodney King and the riots. Specifically, I engage Dr. Dre's 1992 release, *The Chronic*, and his collaborator Snoop Doggy Dogg's 1993 album *Doggystyle* as the leading texts of this variation on the gangsta theme. Both albums were hugely successful, with *Doggystyle* becoming the first debut album in history to enter the *Billboard* music charts at number one. The release of the latter also coincided with Snoop Dogg's arrest on murder charges.[5] According to Quinn, G-funk represented "a softening of politics and sound and a hardening of commercial priorities" for gangsta rap.[6] Inspired by Dre's sampling of mellow funk beats, coupled with the ascent of Death Row records, which he co-founded with Marion "Suge" Knight, G-funk represented a discourse of leisure emphasizing consumption and hypermasculinity.[7] While violence still loomed large in G-funk tracks, it was almost entirely black men killing each other, rather than fixing their sights on police officers or other figures of authority. The post-riots political climate helped guarantee this major shift in gangsta discourses.

The artists of G-funk functioned as modern-day "Pied Pipers," using their hip-hop virtuosity to absorb listening youth into a fantastical abyss that an older generation of African Americans saw as a mortal threat. The Pied Piper is, of course, the anti-hero of folklore who after being swindled and ostracized by the adults of Hamelin, Germany—after he used his musical talent to rid them of a rat infestation—robbed the 13th Century village of its children. Hypnotizing the town's children with his woodwind virtuosity, the piper led them—depending on the version one reads—into the same watery tomb as the

rats or "a cave within a hill."[8] Whereas N.W.A. enlisted their gangsta stylings to assume a vanguard-like posture *contra* those who wished to colonize the urban space of Compton, the artists of the G-funk era led their audience on a Dionysian exodus from the fantasies of old, privileging criminalized discourses of leisure over the romantic legacies of the Civil Rights era. The question of precisely where the music of G-funk was leading the children propelled this extensive public deliberation. The ensuing cultural battle over this era of rap music was, in effect, a struggle for the collective soul of African American youth.

An example of the G-funk mood of leisure and consumption is found in the first few seconds of the track "Rat-Tat-Tat-Tat" from Dre's *The Chronic*. It opens with a sample of Willie Hutch's song "Brother's Gonna Work It Out." Hutch's song was featured on the soundtrack of the 1973 Blaxploitation film *The Mack*, which tells the fictional tale of "Goldie," who returns to New York City after a prison term to become a hugely successful pimp. The film portrays the resistance he encounters, not only from law enforcement and other pimps and drug dealers, but from his Black Nationalist brother. The song, as well as the sample from "Rat-Tat-Tat-Tat" begins with audio from a discussion the two brothers have in an inner-city park. Goldie's brother opines, "You really don't understand do you? Hey man, don't you realize that in order for us to make this thing work, man, we gotta get rid of the pimps and the pushers and the prostitutes and then start all over again clean?" The conversation takes place amid a smooth, melancholy jazz instrumental. While the original album and film portray Goldie passionately defending his right to attain the American Dream through pimping, Dre responds to the lecture with a loud, boisterous cry, "Niggaz you crazy!" before launching into a forceful gangsta track. This dismissive cry highlights G-funks defining gesture: the pimps, pushers, and prostitutes are to be joyfully embraced. They are the stuff of

acquisition and community constitution. G-funk, even more than its predecessors, is invested in leisure and personal upward mobility *contra* the lofty politics of an earlier era.

Many scholars of hip-hop understandably argue that G-funk represented a further decline in gangsta rap's political capital.[9] Although N.W.A. was not a forthrightly political group, songs such as "F--- Tha Police" nonetheless had a political edge. G-funk, with very few exceptions, avoided explicit political critique altogether.[10] Rather than accepting that the genre was void of political content, however, I argue in this chapter that G-funk represented a politics of leisure and upward mobility enacted with the mark of criminality. G-funk deployed racialized inscriptions of criminality to structure a fantasy of leisure in which criminalized racial subjects performed agency through conspicuous consumption practices, hypersexuality, the objectification of women, black-on-black violence, and zealous monetary gain. Leisure, in other words, is what the G-funk artist was selling, and upward mobility was what they sought for themselves. Embedded within this fantasy, I argue, is a resistant impulse that, though degraded by violence, commerce, and misogyny, nonetheless suggests a utopian desire within the fantasies of G-funk. G-funk's gesture corresponded with an accompanying shift in law and order politics that sought to discipline the leisure practices of black youth, as well as a public backlash against gangsta rap that vilified the artists and distributors of this explosion in American popular culture. In other words, leisure became the new site of struggle in which gangsta rappers and the mainstream contested the mark of criminality and its role in constituting the subjectivity of young African Americans.

In this chapter, I first account for the shift in the tenor of gangsta rap away from violence targeting those in power to a more pronounced investment in leisure and black-on-black violence. Next, I offer readings of tracks from *The Chronic* and *Doggystyle* to highlight how G-funk operated within the criminalized terrain of black leisure and

upward mobility, while also retaining gangsta's more sinister elements of violence and misogyny. Third, I explore the moral panic surrounding G-funk, describing how predominantly black responses to the genre constituted a hegemonic struggle over which fantasies might shape black life at the end of the 20th Century. Finally, I conclude with comments on the politics underlying this period in which gangsta rap became increasingly difficult to defend.

COP KILLING, RIOTING, AND THE NEW FACE OF GANGSTA

In 1990, west coast gangsta rapper Ice-T formed the heavy metal, or "thrash," group Body Count. This was not the first convergence of rap music and hard rock. For example, in 1986, Run-DMC collaborated with Aerosmith to release a rap version of the latter's classic track "Walk This Way."[11] Indeed, the subsequent notoriety of Ice-T's crossover act had little to do with the pairing of traditionally "black" rap music and "white" heavy metal, and everything to do with one of gangsta rap's most recognizable tropes: cop killing. Released on their 1992 self-titled debut album, Body Count's "Cop Killer" generated so much public controversy that Ice-T eventually halted distribution of the album in order to remove the song. Writing for the *New York Times*, Jan Pareles lamented, "Now that 'Cop Killer' has been withdrawn, a new mechanism is in effect: if police groups don't like a song, they can make it disappear."[12]

The response to Ice-T's creative venture by politicians and police groups changed the face of gangsta rap. The release of "Cop Killer" coincided with two interrelated political events. The first was the Los Angeles uprising, which left 53 people dead and 2,383 injured. Police made approximately 8,000 arrests and the city sustained an estimated $1 billion in property damage.[13] The uprising constituted a climactic point in American race relations, highlighting in no uncertain terms the deep hostilities between

poor and working class sectors of the African American community and law enforcement.[14]

Furthermore, both Republican incumbent George H.W. Bush and Democratic challenger Bill Clinton competitively postured for the status of being "tough" on crime during the 1992 Presidential Election—the second important political event of this period. Mindful of Dukakis's 1988 defeat, Clinton made law enforcement a central piece of his platform. The candidates also intervened in public debates surrounding violent rap lyrics in order to strengthen their "law and order" credentials.[15] Furthermore, as Dana Cloud has documented, both the Bush and Clinton campaigns postured to blame the Los Angeles uprising on the cultural deficiencies of inner city blacks, rather than the structural inequalities associated with law enforcement and the market economy.[16]

Such was the political context of "Cop Killer." Quinn notes that the fallout surrounding Body Count's controversial song saturated the entire hip-hop nation. Following Ice-T's decision to remove the song from his band's album, Pareles's concerns about a broader cultural precedent for suppressing anti-police discourse in rap music became prophetic. Quinn writes, "Violence against the authorities was expurgated from gangsta rhymes in the wake of the riots. After the 'Cop Killer' debacle, other Time Warner allied artists were dropped."[17] Even established artists like Ice Cube began producing "funky beats and (in relative terms) less politicized themes" following "Cop Killer."[18] As Christopher Sieving argues in his analysis of the public controversy surrounding "Cop Killer," the mainstream backlash and Ice-T's subsequent acquiescence "deracialized" the song, diluting its capacity for potent political critique.[19] What might have represented a confluence of culture and politics that enabled critical reflection upon the intersection between race and crime in America soon became a deluge of reactionary

election year politics that had a chilling effect on the production practices of rap artists and their record distributors.

However, the music did not stop in 1992. To the contrary, gangsta rap continued its commercial ascent to unprecedented levels of success. While gangsta celebrated the massacring of law enforcement officers, such narratives were by no means the only part of its provocative equation. Violence against women and fellow African Americans loomed large in the work of N.W.A., Ice Cube, Geto Boys, Ice-T, and other gangsta acts of the pre-riot era.[20] Thus, as the political violence of gangsta became marginalized, there was plenty of material to take its place. Quinn soberly observes how the 1992 fallout surrounding "Cop Killer" "provides dramatic evidence of the state's demobilization of black rebellion, the redirection of black expressive aggression and race-conscious lawlessness away from public figures and police officers and back onto the marginalized themselves."[21] If rappers could no longer fantasize about killing the police, their fellow citizens would just have to do.

The most commercially successful result of this apparent political vacuum in gangsta rap was the G-funk era. After leaving N.W.A. amid a feud with Eazy-E, Dre founded Death Row Records with his former bodyguard Marion "Suge" Knight.[22] As I have noted, G-funk was characterized by much smoother beats than its gangsta predecessors and a pronounced lack of explicit political content. Rather, leisure and social status became the focal point of gangsta rap: conspicuous consumption, drug use, sexual exploits, and black-on-black violence. Commenting on Dre's *The Chronic*, Chang writes,

> It could be heard as a guiltless, gentrified gangsta—no Peace Treaties, rebuilding demands, or calls for reparations, just the party and the bullshit. The video for [the popular single "Nuthin' But a 'G' Thang"] seemed to ask: don't all boys

> everywhere just want to bounce in hot cars to hotter beats, hang out with their crew, party all night, and spray conceited bitches with malt-liquor?[23]

Dre and Snoop Dogg were, in other words, creating new fantasies for black youth to consume. Because they used their rapping and production talents to assemble a constituency of criminalized subjects (and customers), it is understandable why these Pied Pipers of gangsta rap struck fear into the hearts of many elders in the black community. As Dick Hebdige noted in his influential study of British counterculture, leisure is a site of resistance by which subjects can articulate their relationships to social structures and distinguish themselves from the dominant, or older culture. In other words, it is a mechanism for constructing fantasies.[24] Consumption, for Hebdige, becomes a mode of political practice.

Furthermore, James C. Scott notes how practices outside the watchful eye of the powerful, what he calls *hidden transcripts*, constitute important forms of resistance for those who do not have access to more traditional forms of political struggle.[25] Similarly, in his excellent history of black working class struggle, Robin D.G. Kelley writes, "Hidden in homes, dance halls, and churches, embedded in expressive cultures, is where much of what is choked back at work or in white-dominated public space can find expression."[26] Thus, while the leisure practices at the core of the G-funk repertoire may not "look" political, they nonetheless constitute expressions, albeit often muted and degraded, of black hope and rage. Of course, a chief irony of gangsta rap in general is its commodification and the subsequent appropriation of these very transcripts by the mainstream.

G-funk's politics of leisure also emerged in the wake of a historic gang truce in California. While South Central was still an impoverished urban sector, the gang peace movement helped create a palpable shift in the area's climate. However, while the truce

sparked a dramatic and steady decline in gang-related deaths in Los Angeles and elsewhere, law enforcement persisted in targeting young people of color.[27] Police were suspicious of the truces, believing they were a ploy to collectively target officers (i.e. to focus violence more on establishment targets, as opposed to other African Americans) and began patrolling and breaking-up inter-gang parties.[28] Cities across the country passed racially lopsided curfew and "anti-cruising" ordinances that effectively criminalized the gathering of minority youth on city streets.[29] The early 1990s also saw the passage of draconian federal and state legislation, such as "three-strikes" ordinances that mandated a life sentence for anyone convicted of three felonies.[30] Thus, while the scapegoated youth of America's gangs began making gestures (albeit, often imperfect) toward reconciliation outside the norms of mainstream American culture, law enforcement devised new mechanisms of containment. Many focused on the monitoring of young black youth's leisure practices. Chang writes,

> During the 1980s there had been scattered anti-breakdancing ordinances and outbreaks of boombox citations. But what united the sweep laws of the '90s was a new logic of erasing youths—particularly youths of color—from public space. Not only were there to be no more boomboxes, sagging jeans, street dancing, or public displays of affection, there were to be *no more young people*. Youth itself was being criminalized.[31]

Indeed, as Robin D.G. Kelley observes, black struggle has long reckoned with the infiltration of autonomous spaces by the white power establishment.[32] The criminalization of black leisure, thus, functioned within a much larger narrative of resistance and containment. Black youth of this period were, thus, hailed in several different directions. As law enforcement accelerated its containment of black youth, gangsta rap responded to this phenomenon by commodifying the very practices that were becoming increasingly criminalized. However, far from noble crusaders for the post-truce ambiance of South Central, Knight, Dre, Snoop, and their contemporaries were largely, if not primarily,

invested in extracting value from the fraught parameters of race and criminality to be excavated from the wreckage of the riots. In response, veterans of the Civil Rights era deployed yet another configuration of black subjectivity grounded in conservative public memory of anti-racist struggle in America.

FANTASIES OF LEISURE IN *THE CHRONIC* AND *DOGGYSTYLE*

Of the many common threads that run through Dre's *The Chronic* and Snoop Dogg's *Doggystyle*, the most indicative of the fantasy of leisure comprising the G-funk era are the music videos associated with the two albums. Videos for Dre's singles "Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang" and "Let Me Ride," as well as Snoop's "Gin and Juice" and "Who Am I (What's My Name?)" showcase utopian visions of celebration taking place in the neighborhoods, parks, and parking lots of South Central, echoing the promise of the very post-truce parties that the LAPD were so invested in dismantling.[33] While all four tracks dealt with different subject matter ("Let Me Ride," for instance, dealt with decidedly violent subject matter, while "Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang" was a more standard boast/"dis" track), their videos portrayed liberal amounts of malt liquor and marijuana, casual sex with highly sexualized black women, and aerial shots of Dre and Snoop cruising in low-riders with their posses. All centered around vibrant scenes of young African Americans gathering and dancing in parks, parking lots, drive-in theaters, living rooms, or street corners—the very leisure activities that were becoming increasingly criminalized in the post-riot era. Dre and Snoop Dogg constructed sonic and lyrical opiates that enraptured youth within an alternative fantasy— theirs functioning as a resistant discourse of criminality amid the terror of police surveillance and mass incarceration.

In order to clarify how G-funk artists enacted the mark of criminality through fantasies of leisure, I first turn to the *Doggystyle* track and music video "Gin and Juice." The video opens with a sitcom-style domestic scene in which Snoop Dogg is sleeping in a childhood bedroom, wearing plaid pajamas, and trying to ignore his mother who is banging on the door telling him "If you think you gonna be in bed all day, you crazy!" On either side of his single twin bed are, respectively, posters of himself and George Clinton. This juxtaposition of the contemporary gangsta rap artist and the icon whose music provides so many of *Doggystyle's* samples highlights the peculiar generational politics at play in the G-funk repertoire. It also foreshadows the role of such politics in the public response to Snoop Dogg's work.

Snoop finally emerges from his bedroom only to be further berated by his assertive, well-dressed mother, and malt liquor-drinking, abrasive father. His father declares, "Snoop Doggy Dogg, you gotta get a jobby job," while his mother asks him to "take care of the house" while they are away at a friend's. She also instructs him, "Definitely don't let the Dogg Pound [Snoop's posse] up in here." As the "adults" depart, Snoop Dogg mimic's Macaulay Culkin's iconic scream from the *Home Alone* movies while superimposed by the title "Home Boy Alone." And so the video for "Gin and Juice" begins, with a portrayal of the very generational divide through which the moral panic surrounding G-funk would become articulated.[34]

Listeners, obviously, do not see the domestic skit that opens the video "Gin and Juice." Rather, the track "G-Funk Intro" precedes this third song on *Doggystyle*. Accompanied by Dre and female rapper Lady of Rage, Snoop Dogg announces the fantasy of leisure at the core of G-funk (Rage raps, "I'm sippin' on Tangueray [gin]/With my mind on my money and my mouth fulla gan-jay [marijuana]/R-A-G to the motherfuckin' E/Back with my nigga S-N double O-P") and his own MC virtuosity

("This is just a small introduction to the G-funk Era/Everyday of my life I take a glimpse in the mirror /And I see motherfuckers tryin' to be like me/Ever since I put it down with the D-R-E"). The track concludes with an inebriated Snoop Dogg declaring, "Damn, that Tangueray is talkin' to a nigga," before audibly heading to the bathroom. As his urine hits the water, the album transitions seamlessly into "Gin and Juice." The site of cultural production for G-funk is not the nationalist rallies of Public Enemy or even the militarized Compton streets of N.W.A., but the smoke-filled living rooms of the young, black wordsmith.

Snoop Dogg raps "Gin and Juice" over samplings of the 1970 funk band Slave's single "Watching You" and soul/disco talent George McCrae's "I Get Lifted." The presence of such artifacts of a previous generation highlights the sampling style that defined G-funk in general and *Doggystyle* producer Dr. Dre's repertoire, in particular. Drawing from legends like George Clinton, Al Green, and Curtis Mayfield, as well as lesser-known acts, represented continuity within hip-hop (i.e. the early Bronx parties that gave rise to rap music relied on the mixing of reggae, soul, and funk tracks) and created what Quinn describes as a hard/soft tension in gangsta.[35] It also added an element of complexity to the generational divide I discuss below by embedding cultural references within the gangsta rap album that older generations could identify and, potentially, relate to.[36] Josh Tyrangiel described this style as he identified Dre's *The Chronic* as one of *Time Magazine's* "All-*Time* 100 Albums" in 2006:

> Over grooves built from liberally sampled pieces of the Funkadelic catalog, Dre delivers his verses with hypnotically intimidating ease, so that "Let Me Ride" and "Nuthin' But a G Thang" feel like dusk on a wide-open L.A. boulevard, full of possibility and menace.[37]

While the themes of G-funk songs ranged from cruising, drinking, and smoking, to flagrant misogyny and violence, the sonic atmosphere remained eerily calm. For

example, in the chorus of *The Chronic* track "Let Me Ride," Dre samples 1970s funk group Parliament's release "Mothership Connection (Star Child)," whose refrain is the gospel standard "Swing down sweet chariot, and let me ride." The original song's appeal to a communal, messianic promise stands in ironic contrast to Dre's more sinister content:

> Creepin' down the back street on Deez/I got my glock cocked cuz niggaz want these/Now soon as I said it, seems I got sweated/By some nigga with a tech 9 tryin' to take mine/Ya wanna make noise, make noise/I make a phone call my niggaz comin' like the Gotti boys.

"Let Me Ride," in other words, is invested in articulating Dre's urban authenticity, masculinity, and capacity for violent retaliation. He adds, "No medallions, dreadlocks, or black fists/It's just that gangster glare, with gangster raps/That gangster shit, that makes the gang of snaps, uhh/Word to the motherfuckin' streets." Rejecting the artifacts of the very era he samples in this popular track, Dre rearticulates the pleasure and affect of *Funk* by appropriating it for use in *G-funk*. It is a fantasy of joyful leisure built with the discursive bricks and mortar of the mark of criminality. It is violent, racialized, and urban. Quinn adds that Snoop's "soft-spoken, languid, half-sung" lyrical delivery made this tension even starker.[38] Indeed, the *sound* of G-funk was fundamentally one of leisure even as its lyrical content often asserted daunting visions of violence and sexuality.

Back in the video for "Gin and Juice," after the parents have departed, a characteristically delinquent Snoop Dogg promptly calls the members of the Dogg Pound to join him for a night of partying to culminate at his parents' house. The four-and-a-half minute video alternates between four key sites of performance: Snoop's parents' house, the front yard and neighborhood of another South Central house, a drive-in theatre, and a chain-link highway overpass where Snoop Dogg directly addresses the camera (as he

does throughout the video).[39] All of these locales constitute sites of assemblage and leisure, as well as places likely to be monitored by post-riot Los Angeles police.

The first several moments of the video portray Snoop sitting atop the handlebars of a Dogg Pound member's BMX bicycle as he rides through the residential streets of Long Beach. The bike, in effect, functions as a crude chariot carrying this gangsta virtuoso through his criminalized urban kingdom. Snoop raps in the opening verse,

> With so much drama in the L-B-C [Long Beach, California]/It's kinda hard bein' Snoop D-O-double-G/But I, somehow, some way/Keep comin' up with funky ass shit like every single day/May I, kick a little something for the G's (yeah)/And, make a few ends as (yeah!) I breeze, through/Two in the mornin' and the party's still jumpin'/'Cause my momma ain't home

In addition to asserting his leisurely independence from an older generation, Snoop proclaims his uncanny capacity to produce lyrical "funky ass shit." He makes a similar proclamation in the song's second verse, stating, "Everything is fine when you listenin' to the D-O-G/I got the cultivating music that be captivating he/Who listens, to the words that I speak." Snoop, in his own estimation, holds the capacity to bring tranquility with his every utterance. He is, as this chapter's epigraph asserts, helping his people "party their way through their problems." As I demonstrate below, the "captivating" influence of this "cultivating music" became a source of sheer terror for those invested in an alternative fantasy of community and political practice.

Indeed, the sound and tone of "Gin and Juice" is one at ease with the world. Perhaps more important than Snoop's immense talents as a rapper in this track is *the party*. The events of "Gin and Juice's" Long Beach evening circulate around consumption and pleasure and Snoop is at the center of it all. For example, the second verse unfolds at a drive-in movie theater where the music video for another *Doggystyle* single, "Who Am I (What's My Name)?" plays on the screen. It is advertised as a double

feature alongside the politically charged Hughes Brothers film *Menace II Society*, which was also released in 1993. This juxtaposition between the leisure of G-funk and the somber portrayal of inner city black life in the critically acclaimed film suggests a socially conscious undercurrent to Snoop Dogg's hedonistic utopia.[40] Much like the video for N.W.A.'s "Straight Outta Compton," the visual content of "Gin and Juice" *heightens* the political content of the song as a whole.

Both inside and outside of cars at the theater, young African Americans of both genders interact and dance as they consume liquor and smoke marijuana (at one point two men emerge from a smoke-filled Volkswagen Bug and stagger away after clumsily bumping fists). As Snoop enters a parked topless convertible with a brown paper bag, he raps, "Now, that, I got me some Seagram's gin/Everybody got they cups, but they ain't chipped in/Now this types of shit, happens all the time/You got to get yours but fool I gotta get mine." At precisely this point in the video, several anonymous partygoers shove Styrofoam cups in Snoop's direction as he shakes his hand to indicate "they ain't chipped in" and he isn't sharing. Throughout this and other videos and tracks, Snoop is entirely in charge of the party climate and lies at the center of the pleasure.

Similarly, the music video for "Who Am I (What's My Name)?", the first single released from *Doggystyle*, places the party at the center of the action. Much of the video portrays Snoop and the Dogg Pound, who morph back and forth from human to Doberman Pinscher, being pursued by dog catchers. The dynamic is unmistakably similar to N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton*, in which the LAPD pursue the young black men through the streets of Compton. However, in the G-funk era, *literal* police are relatively absent, replace by bumbling comedic men with nets attempting to quash the Dogg Pound's party (precisely as the LAPD and other law enforcement entities across the nation were attempting to do with black youth in the post-riot era). However, by the end

of the video—throughout which Snoop Dogg raps triumphantly atop a Long Beach record store to minions of joyful citizens following his injunction to "just throw your hands in the motherfuckin' air/And wave the motherfuckers like ya just don't care" — even the dog catchers have joined the party, dancing along with a young black crowd embodying the leisure of the G-funk era.

Throughout *Doggystyle*, and particularly through its iconic single "Gin and Juice," Snoop Dogg and his Dogg Pound partake in leisure practices. Drawing upon marijuana, name-brand gin, and other cultural commodities, the posse engages in a countercultural gesture inaugurated with Dre's own *The Chronic*. At a time when the mere physical gathering of young African Americans became grounds for detainment, the G-funk era located agency and cultural production within a fantasy of pleasure and assemblage that represented an enactment of the mark of criminality. However, Dre and Snoop Dogg's party was not an altogether innocent affair. Just as the Pied Piper led Hamelin's spellbound children to a precarious fate, so too does the culmination of G-funk's party present troubling consequences for its participants. In order to highlight the albums' more sinister and forthrightly criminal dispositions, as well as set the stage for the moral outcry surrounding gangsta, I now turn to the role of violence and gender in this era.

Vengeance and gender in the G-funk era

If Snoop Dogg was a near-messianic figure capable of bringing peace through lyrics and beats, he was also a warrior capable of raining vengeance upon those who transgressed against him. For example, *Doggystyle's* eighth track, "Serial Killa" follows the more reflexive, supernatural near-death narrative "Murder Was the Case" ("As I look up at the sky/My mind starts trippin', a tear drops my eye/My body temperature falls/I'm

shakin' and they breakin' tryin' to save the Dogg) and announces Snoop's willingness to unleash violent force. Snoop raps in the song's second verse,

> The cloud becomes black, and the sky becomes blue/Now you in the midst of the Dogg Pound crew/Ain't no clue, on why the fuck we do what we do/Leave you in a state of paranoia, oooh/Don't make a move for your gat so soon cuz/I drops bombs like Platoon (ay nigga)/Walk with me, hold my hand and let me lead you/I'll take you on a journey, and I promise I won't leave you/(I won't leave you) until you get the full comprehension/And when you do, that's when the mission/Or survival, becomes your every thought/Keep your eyes open, cuz you don't wanna be caught/Half steppin' with your weapon on safety/Now break yourself motherfucker, 'fore you make me/Take this 211 [police code for robbery] to another level/I come up with your ends, you go down with the devil/Now roam through the depths of hell/Where the rest your busta ass homeboys dwell.

The scenario reads like a gang initiation ritual, in which the subject is made aware of the Dogg Pound's prowess and capacity for unparalleled violence. The subject has a choice: honor the supremacy of the Dogg Pound or join his "homeboys" in "the depths of hell." The song's refrain has Snoop asking, "What's my motherfuckin' name?" and guest rapper RBX responding in a gravely voice, "Serial killa! Serial Killa! Serial Killa!" This call and response stands in ironic juxtaposition to the following track, "Who Am I (What's My Name)?," in which Snoop again asks, "What's my motherfuckin' name?" and a chorus of female vocalists reply adoringly, "Snoop Doggy, Do-owww-ohhhh-oggg." While "Serial Killa" enlists ominous but tranquil horns (resembling the flute of a snake charmer) sampled from the Ohio Players' hit "Funky Worm," "Who Am I (What's My Name)?" enlists a collage of joyful funk beats sampled from Funkadelic, George Clinton, and others. Ultimately, the songs' formal similarities, coupled with their stark differences, highlight the contingency of the G-funk subject: he is invested in pleasure and unity provided he and his virtuosity are at the center of admiration and attention. As long as it is *his* party, it may go on. In the face of transgression, however, he will drop "bombs like Platoon."

Similarly, the chorus to "Rat-Tat-Tat-Tat," which appears on Dre's *The Chronic*, infamously declares "Never hesitate to put a nigga on his back," standing in stark contrast to the Black Nationalist appeal from *The Mack* that opened the track.[41] On another song from the album, "A Nigga Witta Gun," the refrain is "Who is the man with the master plan?/A nigga witta motherfuckin' gun." Dre declares,

> 44 reasons come to mind/Why your motherfuckin' brother's hard to find/He be walkin' on the streets and fuckin' with mine/Stupid punk can't fuck with a mastermind/See I never take a step on a Compton block/Or LA without the AK ready to pop/Cos them punk motherfuckers in black and white/Ain't the only motherfuckers I gots to fight.

In a reference to his days with N.W.A. when the "motherfuckers in black and white" of the LAPD were the chief target, Dre insists that other young black men are viable targets for violence as well.[42] The party has not subsumed gangsta's violent, even if ironic, impulses. Rather, it is contingent upon the people's recognition that Dre and Snoop Dogg reign supreme. This element of violence in the G-funk era retained a vital threat element at the core of the mark of criminality while, like N.W.A. before it, articulating it toward the constitution of an affirmative black subjectivity. Furthermore, the role of violence and its articulation to authority and virtuosity not only provided fodder for a cultural backlash against the genre, but also helped set the stage for heightening divisions internal to the hip-hop nation that became mythical, even as it left many victims in its path.

Lyrical talent and violent potential are certainly mechanisms for communicating this supremacy. However, few thematics within G-funk's fantasy of leisure are more pronounced as the role of black women as *objects* of both desire and contempt. One need not even listen to a single track to capture a sense of women's role in this fantasy structure. The cover art for *Doggystyle* partakes not only in objectifying female sexuality, but reifying much broader fantasies about black sexuality. The front cover portrays

Snoop Dogg in his comic book persona, a flannel and blue jean-donning canine, atop a doghouse. With a sparkle in his eye, he reaches down for the "tail" of a female dog—or "bitch" —whose head is hidden inside the doghouse, but her bottom is in full sight. A more detailed story unfolds inside the CD booklet. Snoop orders his canine girlfriend to find him some potent marijuana, declaring "Beeitch, if you ain't got no kinda chronic, yo' punk ass gots to go." Outside of her capacity to provide the "goods," this woman is of no use to Snoop. After he and a fellow member of the Dogg Pound (also a literal dog in this visual narrative, who is assaulted by police officers on his way to the "doghouse") realize that the weed the woman has provided is mere "hocus pocus," which a helpful footnote describes as "stress weed bullshit," they quite literally kick her out of the dog house with the injunction, "Bitch, & take dis bag of bull shit [*sic*] wit' you! Bitch dis is da Dogg Pound ho!" Any woman that does not correspond with the leisurely fantasies of *Doggystyle*, we learn before hearing a single note, is unwelcome. She is a mere "ho."[43]

A reading of the lyrics and music of *The Chronic* and *Doggystyle* highlights how prophetic the latter's cover art is. For example, *The Chronic* closes with the track "Bitches Ain't Shit," whose chorus is a Snoop Dogg-led cadence (Snoop is a prominent guest on many *Chronic* tracks) of "Bitches ain't shit but hoes and tricks/Lick on deez nuts and suck the dick." Although the song functions, in part, as a polemic against Dre's former N.W.A. band-mate Eazy-E (i.e. "I used to know a bitch named Eric Wright"), the thematic of gendered degradation inescapably implicates women in the most literal sense. While several gangsta artists have claimed that not *all black women are bitches and hoes*, Tricia Rose correctly notes, "Sexism socializes all women and men," adding,

> Some hip hop [*sic*] artists defend their endless self-aggrandizing talk about dominating "bitches and hoes" by saying that they are not talking about all women. But "bitches and hoes" are all the women they talk about. The valorization of the gangsta and pimp also highlights and celebrates the very

> women they degrade, encouraging young women fans to emulate the behaviors of "bitches and hoes" to get attention, to be desired, and to be considered sexy.[44]

In other words, gangsta discourse has the potential to condition the gendered subjectivities of all in its midst. Rose also notes that many women participate in this cultural economy of degradation by starring in music videos and providing vocals for tracks. In a particularly ironic twist, "Bitches Ain't Shit" closes with a verse sung by Death Row female vocalist Jewell. She concludes the song with this soulfully sung verse:

> But when I'm on a dick, hell yeah, I get real mean/Like a washing machine/I can wash the clothes/All the hoes knows/That I'm on the flo'ho/But they can't hang with my type on swang/I ain't tryin' to say I suck every ding-a-lang/But just the juicy ones/With the tip of the tongue/And then they're sprung/With the nuts hung.

Unlike Ice Cube's track "It's a Man's World" from his 1991 album *Death Certificate*, which allows female rapper Yo-Yo to literally *respond* to misogynistic lyrical content, Jewell partakes in the reification of the gendered discourses that permeate G-funk. Furthermore, in one of the signature verses of "Gin and Juice," Snoop Dogg raps,

> I got bitches in the living room getting' it on/And, they ain't leavin' til six in the mornin (six in the mornin')/So what you wanna do, sheeeit/I got a pocket full of rubbers and my homeboys do too/So turn off the lights and close the doors/But (but what) we don't love them hoes, yeah!/So we gonna smoke a ounce to this/G's up, hoes down, while you motherfuckers bounce to this.

The mantra "g's up, hoes down" articulates perfectly the role of gender in the fantasy of leisure in the G-funk era. Women, like marijuana and gin, are objects of enjoyment. They are cultural commodities enlisted to build a fantasy.

But is this gendered discourse *criminal*? As I noted earlier, black sexuality is intimately tied to the mark of criminality. Scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins and Kobena Mercer illuminate the articulation of black male sexuality to primal, animal urges that must be contained.[45] Dre, Snoop Dogg, and their gangsta contemporaries are, in effect, appropriating, deploying, and commodifying this central sexual fantasy of

racialized criminality in America. The very discourses that helped transplant Willie Horton into the nightmares of a voting populace in 1988 become, in the fantasy of G-funk (as well as other hip-hop artists) the stuff of agency. The hypersexual black male predator is now inducted with honor into the Dogg Pound. However, this deployment contains more than its own obvious limitations in terms of a progressive feminist politics. Rather, it enabled a cultural backlash against gangsta rap that was even more pronounced than the law enforcement community's answer to "F--- Tha Police."

CULTURAL BACKLASH AND THE SOUL OF A PEOPLE

Hebdige recognized that British subculture was not a complete departure from mainstream, or parent, cultures. Instead, it was a rearticulation thereof. Not only were the punks, teddy boys, and mods of 1970s Britain reckoning with the same shifting material conditions as their primarily working class parents, but also revived some of the modes of cultural production the earlier generation employed when they were young.[46] Quinn makes precisely this observation in her discussion of the G-funk era, writing,

> [T]hrough its music, lyrics, and imagery—especially through the incorporation of parental figures and their cultural repertoires —G-funk also drew attention to shared life experiences. Of course, "parents" readily understood these common material and discursive determinants. Because this music staged generation gaps in its sampling, video narratives, and tonal semantics, it elicited hostile—but also ambivalent and engaged—responses from older black listeners.[47]

G-funk was responding to shifting material conditions associated with the market economy and law enforcement that also impacted the day-to-day lives of an earlier generation. Furthermore, G-funk's liberal use of samples from the *funk era* of the 1970s created a sonic and sometimes visual resonance with older listeners.

For example, in the award-winning video for the *Doggystyle* track "It's a Doggy Dogg World," directors Dre and Ricky Harris construct a nostalgic homage to 1960s and

1970s black popular culture by casting figures like the soul group the Dramatics, Blaxploitation stars Fred Williamson and Pam Grier, as well as Fred "Rerun" Berry of television's *What's Happening!!* Snoop, Dre, and other contemporary stars of G-funk also donned period-specific attire, such as zoot suits, invoking a bygone era of black cultural production. The song's lyrics, however, are unmistakably G-funk, including boasting ("It's like everywhere I look, and everywhere I go/I'm hearin' motherfuckers tryin' to steal my flow") and misogyny ("Well if you give me ten bitches then I'll fuck all ten") built around the chorus "It's a crazy mixed up world, it's a Doggy Dogg World/It's a Doggy Dogg World, it's a Doggy Dogg World/The Dogg's World" sung by a female vocalist. Thus, by placing himself within the commonplaces of an earlier cultural terrain of black sexuality, criminality, and artistry, Snoop Dogg performs the tensions inherent to the G-funk era: invoking the fantasies of old while constructing a new fantasy. It was this dialectic of familiarity and sheer terror that defined many of the tensions associated with the mainstream response to G-funk.

One element of the G-funk era that virtually guaranteed its culturally and politically charged reception by the mainstream and earlier generations was its artists' personal legal problems. Most notably, at precisely the time *Doggystyle* was making popular music history on the music charts, Snoop Dogg was facing murder charges associated with the drive-by shooting of Philip Waldemariam.[48] Although Snoop Dogg was eventually exonerated of the murder, the sensationalism associated with the intersection of Snoop's pending murder trial and the explosive release of an album the magazine *Entertainment Weekly* predicted would have the cultural impact of the Beatle's *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* was unavoidable.[49] The mark of criminality did not only inhabit the cultural production of G-funk, but now the very lives of its artists.

In addition to Snoop Dogg, artists such as Public Enemy's Flava Flav, Tupac Shakur (the subject of my next chapter), Dre, and Suge Knight all had high profile encounters with law enforcement during 1993 and 1994, the very time when G-funk was arriving on the cultural scene.[50] Mainstream media responded with regular commentary on the so-called gangsta "lifestyle" and noted its alleged encroachment on the lives of ordinary Americans. For example, the *Washington Post* wrote that Snoop Dogg and his contemporaries were "blurring the lines between the supposed fiction of 'gangsta' rap and the reality of today's gun culture."[51] Elsewhere, the *Charleston Gazette* ran the headline "Rap Violence Moves out of Recording Studio, into Street," while the *Buffalo News* led with "Controversial Hard-Core Rappers Who Act Out Their Anti-Social Messages," further invoking an infestation metaphor related to rap music.[52] In a cover story on gangsta's "culture of violence," *Newsweek* posed the following:

> But for rap music—particularly for the school known as gangsta rap, which has found a pot of gold in selling images of black-on-black crime to mainstream America—the confluence of the arrests raises disturbing questions: what is the relationship between the violence on the records and the violence in the communities, between capital rhymes and capital crimes? In broader terms, how does art—particularly art often consumed by very young listeners—influence life?[53]

While Eazy-E, Ice Cube, Ice-T, and others provoked significant public outcry, none so starkly mirrored the fantasies they conjured in their music. And with incidents like the Ohio shooting death of three-year-old Aniva Johnson by her 11 year-old brother Michael, who claimed he was merely impersonating his idol Snoop Doggy Dogg, it appeared the fears of Tipper Gore and the Fraternal Order of Police were coming to fruition.[54] Gangsta was creating a culture of violence. The mark of criminality was signifying a genuine threat to the social order, as these Pied Pipers lead youth into a dark cave of nihilism and erasure.

While N.W.A. and Ice-T provoked the ire of many mainstream figures, their critics were primarily white and occupied positions of political power (i.e. police officers, politicians). However, G-funk inspired a cultural backlash from those claiming to represent the very generation whose cultural artifacts provided the break beats and rhythms of Dre and Snoop's *corpus*. Specifically, a legion of black critics of gangsta rap deployed public memory of the Civil Rights Movement to attack the perceived threat of the G-funk era.

The first prominent African American figure to boldly and publicly wage a righteous battle against all things gangsta was Rev. Calvin Butts of Abyssian Baptist Church in Harlem. Butts famously drove a steamroller over piles of gangsta rap CDs in 1994 to protest the genre he believed was denigrating the spiritual and political legacy of black America. Drawing an unambiguous parallel between gangsta and institutional racism of old, Butts declared, "If you use money to justify what you're doing, you're just like the white man who sold you into slavery."[55] In other words, those who commodified and profited from the mark of criminality were complicit in a sinister cycle of exploitation and oppression dating back to the Middle Passage. Elsewhere, Butts opined, "Most of the rappers come out of the black community, and they are prostituting an art form. They're trying to pass off as culture something that is antithetical to what our culture represents."[56] Butts, in other words, imagines himself as a legitimate representative of African American (i.e. "our") culture—a veteran of the Civil Rights era and a patriarch of the black church—while denigrating the gangsta rapper as an as-yet unrepentant prodigal son who has departed the community just as he distorts and exploits its cultural heritage. Inherent to Butts's commentary is a fundamental antagonism regarding what it means to be black in the United States. One, as I have shown, is a

fantasy of leisure and consumption, whereas Butts constructs a fantasy of "We Shall Overcome" that is grounded in a conservative reading of the Civil Rights era.

Following Butts's lead was the National Political Congress of Black Women, which was formed in 1984 to promote "the political and economic empowerment of African American women and their families."[57] The group's founder, C. Delores Tucker, was an activist from the Civil rights era who marched with King in Selma and was an ally of Jesse Jackson. After a series of unsuccessful turns at mainstream politics, Tucker faded into obscurity until 1993 when the brewing controversy surrounding gangsta rap provided a new opportunity for intervention.[58] One of her early successes was persuading Time Warner to sell all of its gangsta rap interests.[59] Routinely invoking the popular memory of the Civil Rights Movement, Tucker insisted, "Our nation cannot be whole if we permit the continuation of an art form that teaches children that rape, hate, and disrespect are OK, and threatens the safety of our communities."[60] Tucker was particularly invested in confronting gangsta's misogynistic tendencies, commenting before a special Congressional hearing on music lyrics and interstate commerce,

> I come to you in the spirit of Dr. King, and on behalf of millions of African American women, women who should not be seen as objects of disdain but rather as grandmothers, mothers, sisters, aunts and daughters who demand respect. And who demand that the human decency and dignity that is defended and protected for other members of American society should not be so freely compromised in our case. Yes, images that degrade our dignity and insult our children and families concern us too, as any other self-respecting member of society. Even if it comes out of our own mouths, the gangsta rap and misogynist lyrics that glorify violence and denigrate women is nothing more than pornographic smut! And with the release of Snoop Doggy Dogg's debut album "Doggystyle," that includes the graphic artwork that is sold with it.
>
> Because this pornographic smut is in the hands of our children, it coerces, influences, encourages and motivates our youth to commit violent behavior—to use drugs and abuse women through demeaning sex acts. The reality of the 90's is that the greatest fear in the African American community does not come from

> earthquakes, floods or fires, but from violence. The kind of violence that has already transformed our communities and schools into war zones, where children are dodging bullets instead of balls and planning their own funerals.[61]

This dystopian portrait of black life stands in stark contrast to G-funk's portrait of a no doubt violent but ultimately joyful cityscape of parties, consumption, and sexuality. Just as Reverend Butts, Tucker invoked a pious fantasy of the Civil Rights era, assuming an emancipatory posture that demands the hard won "human decency and dignity" that survived fire hoses, police dogs, and assassinations during the 1960s. As the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* wrote in 1993, "After years of fighting for an accurate image of black people, it's hard for the civil rights generation to see a new generation proudly embracing the stereotypes—and making big money of it."[62] Whereas one generation dedicated itself to confronting the mark of criminality as a discursive albatross, G-funk embraced, packaged, and sold it.

Tucker and Butts were not alone in their crusade to rescue black youth from all things gangsta. For example, Jesse Jackson commented in *Newsweek's* article on gangsta's "culture of violence," "We're going to take away the market value of these attacks on our person. Anyone white or black who makes money calling our women bitches and our people niggers will have to face the wrath of our indignation."[63] In her testimony before a Senate committee on violence and popular music, Senator Carol Moseley-Braun offered her summary of the contestation over gangsta:

> Obviously, the issue here today involves much more than just the right of the artists to create and perform music of violence and hate if they choose. What is also at issue is whether the music industry that makes so much money from these lyrics has any responsibility for the type of music it promotes and disseminates. Should the question of whether or not an album sells be the only issue that concerns the industry? Or, do those involved in the creation, performance, promotion, production and distribution of these lyrics have any responsibility to all of our children, to all of our families, and to all of our communities?[64]

Consistently, critics like Tucker, Jackson, and Moseley-Braun both invoked the rhetoric of Civil Rights while directing the vast majority of their contempt not toward the gangsta rap artists as such, but at the record companies and distributors who profited from their cultural labor. Their efforts were, in some ways, quite successful. As G-funk evolved into a potent cultural commodity, many radio stations—several of them black-owned—refused to play Dre or Snoop's songs. However, like N.W.A. before them, a lack of radio play did little to hurt their ability to move records.[65]

A campaign waged solely on challenging a predominantly white-owned profit-making entertainment apparatus invested in the commodification of criminalized discourses of black violence and sexuality is, in many ways, a noble, even radical endeavor. Indeed Butts and Tucker's experiential and discursive relationships to the Civil Rights Movement are often resonant and quite moving in their espoused investment in the fate of black American youth. However, this generational backlash against gangsta rap was not solely interested in sustaining the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr. For example, a 1994 issue of *Newsweek* describes Jesse Jackson's political tone at the time:

> Jackson sees no choice but to focus on the black community itself… He rebuked Chicago blacks who are championing the release of a convicted—but supposedly "reformed"—gang leader. Jackson won't object to spending more on prisons. He won't rule out a voluntary program to use the implantable contraceptive Norplant to prevent teen pregnancies. To stop the murder, he says, blacks must undergo a "social-values revolution." Students must report drug and gun users. Families must lay down rules. Cops must be on the beat in the schools.[66]

The article also noted Jackson's then-recent admission that he feared being followed down the street by a black person. In other words, a man traditionally associated with speaking to power on behalf of the African American community now focused inward, advocating policies such as increased policing and drug law enforcement that would strengthen the prison-industrial complex. Testifying before the Senate, Tucker warned,

"Being coaxed by gangster rap, [black youth] will trigger a crime wave of epidemic proportions that we have never seen the likes of. Regardless of the number of jails built, it will not be enough."[67] Tucker, in effect, appeals to the prevailing fears of ravenous black youth that structured dominant fantasies of race and criminality at the time.

The ambivalences inherent in Tucker and Jackson's rhetoric become acutely apparent when considering the strange bedfellows they attracted. For example, Tucker became a close ally of William Bennett who, as Drug Czar for the Bush Administration, was a chief architect of the very policies that placed so many African American youth in prison at the time.[68] As Jeff Chang comments, "As the [1996] presidential season rolled around, [Tucker] joined with Republican candidate Bob Dole. Together, Bennett, Dole, and Tucker made Suge Knight, Death Row Records and Snoop Dogg into clay pigeons for their culture war." He adds, "Tucker was enormously helpful to white cultural conservatives," because she "insulated white cult-cons from criticism" with her soaring references to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks.[69]

Furthermore, Tricia Rose notes that conservative critiques of gangsta's misogynistic content are themselves structured within a problematic fantasy of the nuclear family that sustains women's oppression. She adds, "The disrespect to black women by some black men is, for [cultural conservatives], a sign of insubordinate black masculinity and thus needs correction and containment."[70] In other words, Tucker and her allies waged a battle against gangsta rap by embracing a hegemonic reading of the mark of criminality, reifying a dominant fantasy by which black bodies and communities were effectively construed as pathological threats to the social order. While G-funk certainly led young black listeners on a dangerous journey of criminalized leisure, Tucker et al.'s co-opted allusions to an earlier era had significant limitations all their own.

POLITICS, LEGACY, AND THE POLITICS OF LEGACY

This chapter has engaged the commercial and cultural climax of gangsta rap known as the G-funk era. Focusing on Dr. Dre's *The Chronic* and Snoop Doggy Dogg's *Doggystyle*, I described how this episode of gangsta rap operated within the historical context of the Los Angeles uprising and the reactionary politics that emerged in its wake. At a time when violence against figures of authority was effectively forbidden in rap music, G-funk enacted black criminality through fantasies of leisure and consumption, valorizing drug use and black-on-black violence, as well as misogyny toward black women. I posit Dre and Snoop Dogg as contemporary Pied Pipers whose virtuosity led a younger generation away from the fantasies of old. The subsequent cultural backlash against G-funk was led by figures laying claim to public memory of the Civil Rights era, arguing gangsta rap denigrated the African American community and contributed to a so-called "culture of violence" that threatened black youth with erasure and civil society with destruction. This generational divide, however, quickly became appropriated by cultural conservatives in a way that recuperated the hegemonic fantasies of race and criminality that supported the mass incarceration of black youth. This co-optation, I argue below, further stifled the emancipatory potential of gangsta rap.

Commentators during the early 1990s, like many contemporary hip-hop scholars, argued that G-funk was an abrupt departure from the lofty politics of Public Enemy and other "message" acts of the hip-hop generation.[71] While some journalists lamented rap music's apparent abandonment of the wholesome and conscious discourses of earlier generations, still others compared gangsta to more acceptable contemporaries in the hip-hop nation.[72] For example, the ascent of Dre and Snoop Dogg coincided with the relatively more modest and brief success of Arrested Development, a Georgia-based hip-hop group "known for its positive outlook—a movement [the group's front man] Speech

refers to as 'Life Music'."[73] Implicit (and at times, explicit) in these comparisons is the notion that Arrested Development represented the political and legitimate legacy of hip-hop, while Dre and Snoop constituted a perversion thereof.[74]

I believe such a perspective, although rightfully critical of gangsta's many limitations, is myopic with regard to what "counts" as "political." I agree with Kelley's argument that we must envision anti-racist struggle beyond conventional modes of political organizing, seeking instead to find resistance within the "hidden transcripts" of black leisure and expression.[75] Furthermore, if we are to understand criminality as a site of struggle embedded within a broader terrain of antagonistic social relations, then the gesture of G-funk is positively political. In a post-uprising era in which numerous gang truces created the conditions of possibility for peace and cooperation between young African Americans, the leisurely practices associated with this utopian desire were themselves criminalized because they represented nothing less than the social cohesion of racialized subjects outside of the hegemonic order. While prevailing law enforcement policies and the discursive fantasies that accompanied them imagined the very presence of assembled black youth as a threat to civilization, G-funk operated within this criminalized terrain and enacted an affirmative fantasy of black leisure practices. In the words of Jeff Chang, "*The Chronic* seemed a heaven-sent balm" in the wake of the Los Angeles uprising.[76] Thus, Snoop Dogg's gesture of "Now just throw your hands in the motherfuckin' air/And wave the motherfuckers like ya just don't care" can be understood as a resistant gesture, embodying the admittedly degraded and commodified hopes of a criminalized generation of minority youth. Dre and Snoop, in other words, enacted the mark of criminality to construct a resistant fantasy of black life. Their audience was one waiting to be led to a new way of being.

It is also important to observe the resistant potential of one of G-funk's most prominent ambivalences: its celebration of conspicuous consumption. The image of hypermasculine "gangstas" consuming large amounts of booze and marijuana, driving souped-up cars and boasting about monetary gain is a common thread that runs through all of gangsta rap, but is particularly acute within the domain of G-funk. For all of the obvious limitations associated with such fantasies—not least of all their capacity to create an unresolved disconnect between the subjectivity of the affluent artist and the black youth for whom he claims to speak—locating them within the broader terrain of criminality highlights a resistant character. As Linebaugh notes, the history of criminality is largely one of ownership in which competing classes engage in often-bloody struggles over resources.[77] While G-funk occupies a historical space far-removed from the fallen wood of the Rhineland province or the shipyards of early capitalist England, its fantasies of acquisition can still be read as resistant. The ability of a criminalized black subject to triumphantly lay claim to commodities and female bodies constitutes a bizarre articulation of the American Dream in which the descendents of slaves can declare "This is mine," or, more pointedly, "*I am taking your stuff*." I am not suggesting that claiming the female body as property is a gesture to be replicated as sound political practice, but do believe that any gesture by a criminalized subject to lay claim to that which a racist society has denied him is an affront to the political economy of race and crime in America.

But equally as important as resisting the temptation to jettison G-funk outright is refusing to fetishize it as resistant and, therefore, virtuous. As the above sampling of *The Chronic* and *Doggystyle* attests, the lyrical, visual, and sonic content thereof is particularly problematic within the domain of gender relations. By wholeheartedly embracing the mark of criminality *vis-à-vis* black masculinity, Dre, Snoop, and their

contemporaries not only provide precisely the kind of cultural fodder that enables both ferocious offenses against rap music, but also broader discourses and policies that pay devastating dividends to working class and poor African Americans. I agree with Rose that scholars and activists should both defend rap artists against the disingenuous attacks of figures such as William Bennett while simultaneously remaining principally invested in a critique of such troubling gendered discourses.[78]

The willingness of G-funk artists to partake in such degrading gendered discourses, as well as constructing fantasies associated with conspicuous consumption and black-on-black violence, highlights the conditioning role of market logic within the fantastical domain of the genre. While *The Chronic* and *Doggystyle* operate within a discursive and material space marked by the continued policing and incarceration of black subjects and their communities, both albums are also inscribed with a pronounced liberal ideological orientation.[79] For example, Dre responded to some members of the black community's grievances about his work by explaining, "I don't consider myself no gangsta. I'm just in it to make money."[80] In other words, his deployment of the mark of criminality is driven by his personal ambitions, not an allegiance to the resistant traditions residing within racialized discourses of criminality. Furthermore, while Snoop Dogg suggests a truce-era convergence of two South Central neighborhoods when he declares, "Compton and Long Beach together, now you know you in trouble," on the *Chronic* track "Nuthin' But a 'G' Thang," he quickly follows with the declaration, "Death Row is the label that paaaaays me!" In other words, the solidarity between Dre (from Compton) and Snoop Dogg (from Long Beach) has far less to do with the cohesion embedded within the leisure practices of truce-era youths and everything to do with their shared relationship to cultural production within Death Row Records. One suspects that Dre and Snoop Dogg would lead their flock only as far as their commercial ambitions required.[81]

But the posture from which one chooses to critique G-funk is also profoundly important. The generational disconnect between G-funk and figures such as Rev. Butts and C. Delores Tucker highlight a fundamentally different relationship to the mark of criminality dividing these two fantasies of black subjectivity. For Butts, Tucker, and their allies, the mark of criminality operated within a fantasy structure whose primary referent was public memory of the Civil Rights Movement. This was a fantasy of an era whose relationship to the criminal justice system was primarily in the form of civil disobedience arrests, ferocious police dogs, and the brutal fire hoses of the South. While the Civil Rights Movement also included urban uprisings and black militancy, Butts et al. domesticate the memory of this era's radicalism within a more conservative and religiously infused fantasy.[82] The black subject, within such a fantasy, was nonviolent, virtuous, and targeted by law enforcement for unambiguously dubious reasons. It was a fantasy of churches and innocence, *not* of consumption and violence.

Thus, while the young artists and consumers of G-funk were thrust into a dominant fantasy of racialized criminality in which the archetype of Willie Horton structured so much of what it meant to be black and urban in the popular imaginary, Butts and Tucker remained decidedly outside this fantasy; recognizing its devastating toll, but unwilling and unable to embrace the mark of criminality as a tool of rhetorical resistance. Instead, they responded with terror and outrage at the prospect of black youth enacting the criminal images that hegemonic discourse had thrust upon them. Finding such gangsta fantasies far too troubling to engage for a generation old enough to remember lynching and Jim Crow, these elders found recourse in popular public memory of the Civil Rights Movement.

This is not to suggest that the older generation of African American leaders should have embraced wholeheartedly the work of Dre and Snoop Dogg. Instead, they

might have adopted a posture similar to California Congresswoman Maxine Waters, who said of gangsta rap artists in her testimony before the U.S. Senate,

> These are my children. Indeed, they are your children, too. They have invented a new art form to describe their pains and fears and anger with us as adults. I do not intend to marginalize them or demean them. Rather, I take responsibility for trying to understand what they are saying. I want to embrace them and transform them.[83]

While I remain convinced of the limitations associated with imagining gangsta rap as an unfettered articulation of the heretofore inaccessible realities of racialized urban landscapes, I agree with Waters that an older generation of African Americans, indeed *all* activists invested in confronting violence and mass incarceration in America, should have assumed a posture of *listening* during the G-funk era. A fundamental assumption that drives this entire project is the belief that *any* destabilization of the mark of criminality enables political intervention and rhetorical practice. If the work of the G-funk era—quite possibly the most hedonistic and misogynistic the genre of gangsta rap has to offer—contains a kernel of emancipatory potential, then certainly critics can find a political impulse residing within other destabilizations. As I noted in my first chapter, the moment a fantasy reaches its own constitutive limits, new opportunities for invention emerge. By engaging the deconstructive gesture of gangsta during the early 1990s, rather than vying for the right to speak for the African American community, these activists might have created the conditions of possibility for a constructive dialogue across generations, finding within the body of G-funk artistry a critique of the prison-industrial complex and the echo of an era of activism whose mythical status has far too often rendered it incompatible with the material needs of the current era.[84] Furthermore, such a dialogue could have circumvented the generational divide that structured so much public deliberation about the G-funk era. How different this conversation might have been if

those involved found political expression in the sonic generational overlap that structured G-funk's artistry (i.e. 1970s funk era samples accompanying modern-day raps), finding therein a mechanism for articulating shared material relationships to racism, exploitation, and mass incarceration.[85]

However, as Kristen Hoerl has cautioned, "The processes of popular memory construction [of the Civil Rights era] obscure the presence of counterpublics critical of contemporary race relations."[86] As the enthusiastic embrace of Butts and Tucker by cultural conservatives indicates, theirs was a vision of racial struggle particularly vulnerable to appropriation by those invested in sustaining dominant fantasies of racialized criminality. Indeed, this confluence of popular Civil Rights public memory and cultural conservatism against gangsta rap converged with a broader bipartisan attack against affirmative action and similar policies. Such gestures were premised on the belief that the days of institutional racism were over and that responsibility for racial upward mobility resided within the black community.[87] As a result, the prospect of unearthing G-funk's critique of modern race relations was largely lost. Instead, both Democrats and Republicans continued to gain political capital by assuring mainstream America it would be protected from an increasingly ferocious racial criminal threat.

Furthermore, while many brave voices attempted to challenge Tucker's right to speak on behalf of civil rights in America, the significant mainstream success she enjoyed helped secure a deep chasm between gangsta rap artists and the political possibilities inherent within the hip-hop nation.[88] Thus, the market logic that drove so much of gangsta rap's discursive work subordinated its more potent and emancipatory elements. With even less room for political imagination, gangsta became more firmly embedded within an industrial logic, in which one's fidelity to record companies and the almighty dollar facilitated a climate of crass materialism and, as we see in the following chapter,

deadly divisiveness. As the G-funk era gave way to the mainstreaming of gangsta rap, numerous battles were waged for the legacy of this troubling sector of the hip-hop nation, battles largely waged upon the work and memory of Tupac Amaru Shakur.

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[1] Browning 1905.
[2] Dre 1995.
[3] See, for example, Davis 1990.
[4] Davis 1990; Bergesen and Herman 1998; Crogan 2002; "Scenes from a Riot," 1992.
[5] Jolson-Colburn 1993; Jones IV 1993.
[6] Quinn 2005, 14.
[7] Ibid.
[8] See Browning 1905; Grimm and Grimm 1816. Both works are transcribed (and, in the case of the Grimm Brothers' piece, translated) by D.L. Ashliman and available at http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/hameln.html#grimm245 (accessed 16 June 2009).
[9] Watkins, for example, argues that the release of *The Chronic* constituted the death knell of rap music's status as a vibrant medium of cultural resistance. See Watkins 2005. Also see George 1992; Kelley 1994.
[10] One exception is Dre's "The Day the Niggaz Took Over," which appeared on *The Chronic*. The track represents a charged invective following the Los Angeles uprising, standing in stark contrast to the smoother beats of the rest of the album.
[11] See Chang 2005, 245.
[12] Pareles 1992.
[13] Bergesen and Herman 1998; Crogan 2002; "Scenes from a Riot," 1992.
[14] See Apple, Jr. 1992; Davis 2006; Reeves 1993.
[15] Edsall 1992; Mills 1992; Morris, Reibman, and Holland 1992
[16] Cloud 1998.
[17] Quinn 2005, 110.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Sieving also argues that Ice-T and his supporters' emphasis on his First Amendment rights, rather than the politics of race and law at the song's core, further domesticated it and guaranteed its eventual removal from Body Count's album. See Sieving 1998.
[20] For example, the Houston-based Geto Boys gained notoriety partially through the track "Mind of a Lunatic," which offered a point-of-view narrative of a psychopathic rapist with necrophiliac tendencies. N.W.A.'s second album, *Efil4zaggin* ("Niggaz 4 Life" inverted), featured the track "To Kill a Hooker."
[21] Ibid, 111.
[22] Jones IV 1993. As I note in the following chapter, Death Row was instrumental in transforming gangsta rap into a towering industry and fomenting the infamous East Coast-West Coast rap music rivalry. Knight, in particular, became legendary for brute and legally dubious business practices that cemented the reputation of rap labels as the entertainment equivalent of street gangs.

[23] Chang 2005, 420.
[24] Hebdige 1979.
[25] Scott 1990.
[26] Kelley 1994, 51.
[27] Rowland 1992.
[28] Katz 1992; Serrano and Katz 1992.
[29] Chang 2005.
[30] Marable 2007.
[31] Chang 2005, 389. Emphasis in original. Also see Grossberg 2005.
[32] Kelley 1994.
[33] Chang 2005.
[34] A similar episode opens the music video for Dr. Dre's "Nuthin' But a G' Thang." Dre arrives at Snoop's house to pick him up for a picnic. Upon entering, Snoop's father comments, "I hope you pickin' him up to find a job!" while sitting on the living room couch with a bottle of malt liquor in his hand. Dre sarcastically replies, "Yeah, we goin' to work so we can grow up and be just like you." Indeed, the generational divide looms large in G-funk.
[35] Chang 2005; Quinn 2005.
[36] Quinn 2005.
[37] Tyrangiel 2006.
[38] Quinn 2005, 146.
[39] There are two versions of the "Gin and Juice" video. One, the "explicit" version, contains several scenes at the overpass, while the "clean" version both omits explicit language and replaces many of the overpass sequences with segments in front of a Long Beach house.
[40] For reviews and other information about *Menace II Society*, visit http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0107554/ (accessed 16 June 2009). Hughes and Hughes 1993.
[41] Snoop Dogg also recites this lyric during the first verse of "Who Am I (What's My Name)?", suggesting further that even such a joyful song contains the always-looming threat of violent explosion.
[42] It is important to note that N.W.A. also targeted fellow African Americans for their fantasies of violence. As Cube rapped on "Straight Outta Compton," I'm knockin' niggaz/Out tha box, daily/Yo weekly, monthly and yearly/Until them dumb motherfuckers see clearly."
[43] For a scholarly critique of these and other themes, see Best and Kellner 1999.
[44] Rose 2008, 173-4.
[45] Hill Collins 2005; Mercer 1997.
[46] Hebdige 1979.
[47] Quinn 2005, 149.
[48] DeRogatis 1993. As I note in the following chapter, Death Row was instrumental in transforming gangsta rap into a towering industry and fomenting the infamous East

Coast-West Coast rap music rivalry. Knight, in particular, became legendary for brute and legally dubious business practices that cemented the reputation of rap labels as the entertainment equivalent of street gangs.
[49] Harrington 1993; Williams 1996.
[50] Harrington 1993; Jones IV 1993; "Rap Manager Arrested on Weapons Charge" 1994.
[51] Harrington 1993.
[52] McShane 1994; Respers 1993.
[53] Leland 1993.
[54] See, for example, Reed 1994.
[55] Worner 1994.
[56] Violant 1993.
[57] United States House of Representatives 1994.
[58] Chang 2005.
[59] Kinnon 1997.
[60] Ransom 1993.
[61] United States House of Representatives 1994.
[62] "Old Stereotypes of Bad Rap" 1993.
[63] Leland 1993.
[64] United States Senate 1994.
[65] Freeman 1993; Santiago 1993.
[66] Fineman 1994.
[67] Cited in Chang 2005, 453.
[68] See, for example, Reeves and Campbell 1994.
[69] Chang 2005, 452.
[70] Rose 2008.
[71] George 2004; Quinn 2005; Watkins 2005.
[72] See, for example, Holden 1994.
[73] Outerbridge 1993.
[74] See, for example, DeRogatis 1994; Santiago 1993; Washington 1994.
[75] Kelley 1994.
[76] Chang 2005, 419.
[77] Linebaugh 1992; 1993.
[78] Rose 2008.
[79] By liberal, I refer to the classical ideology of individualism, not the policies of "big government" associated with the Democratic Party. See, for example, Cloud 1998a.
[80] Worner 1994.
[81] This is not to suggest that G-funk artists were entirely uninterested in community-based work. For example, in 2005, Snoop Dogg participated in the movement to halt the execution of reformed Crips gang founder Stanley "Tookie" Williams. See "Snoop Dogg to Join Prison Rally" 2005.
[82] For more on public memory and the Civil Rights Movement, see Hoerl 2007; 2009.
[83] United States Senate 1994.

[84] See, for example, Dyson 2000.
[85] See Quinn 2005.
[86] Hoerl 2009, 72.
[87] Amaker 1988; Brown et al. 2003; D'Souza 1995.
[88] See Chang 2005.

Chapter 5: "Thug Life": Tupac Shakur and the Messianic Politics of Gangsta

> It is a central moral contention of Christianity that God may be disguised in the clothing—maybe even the rap—of society's most despised members.
>
> – Michael Eric Dyson[1]

In 1997, Nikki Giovanni published the book *Love Poems*. Giovanni is both a noted African American poet and a veteran of the Black Power movement. She is an author steeped in the militancy of an era whose political legacy saturates even her most recent work.[2] It might seem peculiar that a descendant of this proud era of political organizing and lofty nationalist dreams would dedicate a book she described as "a valentine from me to the world" to the then-recently deceased gangsta rapper Tupac Shakur.[3] Her dedicatory page describes Shakur as

> a lover whose love was often deliberately misunderstood but who will live in the sun and the rains and whose name will echo through all the winds whose spirit will flower and who like Emmett Till and Malcolm X will be remembered by his people for the great man he could have become and most especially for the beautiful boy that he was.[4]

Giovanni also, following Shakur's death on September 13, 1996, famously had the words "Thug Life" tattooed on her left arm in homage to the fallen rapper, who had inscribed the same phrase across his stomach. She described Shakur as "the first martyr" of a young generation of African Americans.[5]

Shakur died in a hail of bullets in Las Vegas at the height of a sensationalized and vitriolic feud between West and East Coast rap artists and producers. Giovanni's embrace of this hugely popular and deceased gangsta rapper constituted a pronounced break with many prominent African American figures at the time. As I noted in the previous chapter, C. Delores Tucker and Rev. Calvin Butts invoked public memory of anti-racist struggle

to vilify and, to an extent, censor the work of Shakur and his gangsta contemporaries.[6] The work and memory of Shakur was a site of struggle for articulating the legacy of black politics in America. Was he a mere "thug" complicit in the reification of a musical genre that was negatively influencing black youth and sustaining crass caricatures of black life, or was his "thuggery" a nuanced articulation of black rage whose complexities might just be the brightest hope for black radical struggle in the Twentieth Century?

As Murray Forman notes, the life, death, and legacy of Tupac Shakur have received unprecedented attention from mainstream media and hip-hop scholars; far more than any of his contemporaries.[7] In 2001, prominent race scholar Michael Eric Dyson wrote a bestselling book pondering the legacy of Shakur. In 2003, Harvard University hosted a conference entitled "All Eyez on Me: Tupac Shakur and the Search for the Modern Folk Hero."[8] The 2003 documentary *Tupac: Resurrection* was nominated for an Academy Award and is the thirteenth highest grossing American documentary of all time.[9] Eithne Quinn argues that Shakur embodied the tensions that defined the gangsta genre. She writes,

> Stated in more structural terms, Tupac, perhaps more than any other individual in this story, captures the deep and dramatic conflict between…new possibilities opened up for independent black culture workers in the information age, and…the broader context of inequalities in wealth and opportunities that, in many ways, defined the gangsta genre.[10]

Shakur was an artist laden with contradictions. While he was capable of producing eloquent and insightful political raps, he also produced the kind of violent, materialistic, and misogynistic discourses so common in the gangsta genre. While he was socially conscious and well versed in black radical traditions, his life was also the stuff of media sensation given his many public feuds and encounters with law enforcement.[11] Shakur

embodied the promises and perils of the hip-hop nation, combining the political clarity of Public Enemy with the relatively leisurely abandon of the G-funk era.

In order to account for Shakur's iconic status in the hip-hop nation, and his role in functioning at the nexus of the mark of criminality, I turn to Shakur's central motif, "Thug Life," and its role in articulating a politics of black criminality. In this chapter, I argue that the articulation of "Thug Life" in Tupac Shakur's work represents a troubled, and ultimately domesticated *messianic fantasy of resistance* within the genre of gangsta rap. Drawing from Walter Benjamin's "messianic Marxism," I argue that "Thug Life" constituted an attempt to salvage the political content of black criminality *vis-à-vis* gangsta rap that was ultimately subsumed by the ambivalences of the music industry and the hegemony of public memory. While the work of Tupac Shakur failed to provide the kind of messianic deliverance that could rupture the trajectory of hegemonic fantasies of black criminality, his configuration of "Thug Life" nonetheless represents the most potent articulation of the mark of criminality that came closer than any other in the gangsta genre to *exploding* the historical trajectory of black criminalization. "Thug Life," as a fantasy of black criminality, held the potential to re-imagine racialized criminality as a force of social change.

Noting "Thug Life's" early manifestation as a politicized enactment of black criminality, or what I have called in this project *the mark of criminality*, I examine its changing expressions through the trajectory of Shakur's work. In doing so, I account for myriad variables associated with incarceration, bodily violence, and the music industry that distorted the political content of "Thug Life" and subordinated it to the interests of musical commerce. I also observe how in the year following Shakur's death, "Thug Life" became the focus of mainstream disciplining through public memory, as prevailing fantasies surrounding Shakur's legacy circulated around the so-called "lessons" of his

troubled life and death. However, as I have claimed about the previous case studies in this project, even the most degraded variations of "Thug Life" represented a resistant posture toward dominant fantasies of racialized criminality.

This chapter proceeds in four parts. First, I interrogate Shakur's earliest articulations of "Thug Life" as a messianic gesture amid the circulating discourses of racialized criminality through rap music in the early 1990s, demonstrating its capacity to express black political rage through the fantasies of gangsta. Second, I demonstrate how Shakur's allegiance to Death Row Records and investment in the East Coast-West Coast hip-hop feud transformed "Thug Life" into a problematic discourse of industry rivalries that undermined its emancipatory potential. Next, I document the ways Shakur's public memory became domesticated following his 1996 death, noting how various mainstream rhetors reified dominant fantasies of racialized criminality through their memorialization of Shakur. Finally, I consider Shakur's legacy as a whole for a progressive politics of racialized criminality.

"Thug Life" as Gangsta Rap's Messianic Gesture

At its core, my project is driven by a normative critical posture of unearthing utopian desires within often-degraded discourses. Specifically, I have argued that while gangsta rap constituted an ambivalent and frequently problematic discourse of racialized criminality during the late 1980s and early 1990s, it nonetheless functioned within a broader historical trajectory of discursive and material confrontations associated with labor, capital, and crime. In other words, the resistant enactments of the mark of criminality within the *corpus* of gangsta rap embodied the muted emancipatory fantasies of a generation of working class and poor African Americans reckoning with the prison-industrial complex.

As I noted in earlier chapters, several authors have discussed the role of ideology in subordinating the collective yearnings of a populace toward the ends of exploitation and division. Fredric Jameson argues that within every ideological text are the suppressed desires of a people for a better way of being.[12] Similarly, Michel de Certeau writes that although hegemonic historiography represses the resistant voice, it nonetheless lingers within the historical text, posing a constant threat of insurgency.[13] But how might critics and rhetors unearth these more emancipatory fragments from otherwise ambivalent, even harmful texts? Walter Benjamin's theorizing of what Michael Löwy calls a "messianic Marxism" provides a conceptual tool for identifying those rhetorical gestures that seek to unearth the resistant potential residing within a particular historical terrain.[14]

Benjamin's often fragmentary and elusive works wedded the seemingly contradictory traditions of Romanticism, Jewish theology, and historical materialism in the service of a materialist hermeneutics intended to rescue revolutionary potential from the clutches of the ruling class. In order to clarify his novel and complex position, I cite Benjamin at length:

> Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it "the way it really was." It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger. The danger threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it. For both, it is one and the same thing: the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer; he [*sic*] comes as the victor over the Antichrist. The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he [*sic*] is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious.[15]

The messianic gesture, in other words, is a strategy of critical intervention. In an illuminating article on the relevance of Benjamin's work for rhetorical criticism, D.

Robert DeChaine writes, "His call for revolutionary action is to the living breathing historical agent, one with the courage and awareness to break through the mythology and imagine a less oppressive, more humane world."[16] The Messiah, writes Benjamin, must "brush history against the grain" and recognize the "small gateway" through which she or he might enter and "make the continuum of history explode."[17] Benjamin imagines materialist criticism as a redemptive practice achievable only in fleeting, explosive moments of radical possibility (i.e. crisis, trauma). By seizing what de Certeau described as "lapses in the syntax constructed by the law of a place," Benjamin believed the Messiah could merge past and present, rescuing both from the oppressive march of history.[18] Benjamin wrote with a ferocious investment in an uncertain yet utopian future that would only unfold if exploited and oppressed peoples are able to "blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history."[19]

The story of gangsta rap in this project, thus far, has been one in which the radical possibility embedded within the gangsta text was ultimately subordinated by hegemonic fantasies of criminality, as well as the limitations of gangsta cultural production, itself. Although N.W.A. enacted many of the nationalist fantasies of an earlier era through the mark of criminality, and the artists of the G-funk era embodied the utopian desires of a criminalized generation of black youth, both fell prey to reactionary discourses of black criminality, as well as their own shortcomings as resistant rhetors.

However, as Cornel West has argued, there remains a strong messianic current in all black cultural production in the United States, one invested in the hope of redemptive deliverance whether from the chains of slavery, the violence of Jim Crow, or the prison-industrial complex.[20] Wilson Moses describes how generations of black struggle in America have employed "prophetic, millennial, or missionary ideology" envisioning the salvation of an oppressed people.[21] He argues that messianism can reside in groups or in

individuals acting on behalf of groups. Jacqueline Bacon writes, "The plight of African Americans…assumes a messianic significance, embodying God's promise to redeem American society."[22] Benjamin, I believe, would argue that these individuals and groups sought to rescue African American subjectivity from the material and discursive violence of a racist society. Below, I document how Shakur's "Thug Life" initially functioned as a rescue attempt.

"I was given this world, I didn't make it": Finding "Thug Life" in "'Pac's Life"

Tupac Amaru Shakur was born on June 16, 1971, a mere month after his mother, Afeni Shakur, was released from jail. An active member of the Black Panther Party in New York City, Afeni, along with twenty other Party members, was arrested in 1969—at the height of the FBI's infamous program of infiltration called COINTELPRO—on charges of planning to bomb several public places.[23] As Tupac recalls in an interview, "I was cultivated in prison. My embryo was in prison."[24] He was quite literally conceived at the intersection of black radical politics and racialized criminality. In 1971, Shakur entered an America increasingly saturated with Nixonian fantasies of law and order that thrived on the mark of criminality.

After several years spent between jobs and houses, Afeni moved her family to Baltimore in 1986 before making a prophetic pilgrimage to Marin City, California three years later. It was at this time that Afeni, amid the pressures of poverty, became a crack cocaine addict. For a brief period, Tupac became involved with the local drug trade. He also began developing a political analysis of inner city black life in America. In one wide-ranging interview Shakur conducted at the age of seventeen, he commented on poverty and the role of the American education system in reifying oppressive social structures.[25]

Just as the Shakurs journeyed to the West Coast, N.W.A. and other gangsta rappers were transforming American popular music and provoking heated public deliberations over the mark of criminality. The epicenter of hip-hop was rapidly shifting from New York to California. Shakur became heavily involved in the underground hip-hop scene.[26] Archival video footage from *Tupac: Resurrection* portrays him performing at the Marin City Fair in 1989, where he raps polemical lyrics like, "The American Dream wasn't meant for me/'Cause Lady Liberty's a hypocrite/She lied to me."[27] His first major breakthrough came following a successful audition for the popular rap group Digital Underground. Touring with the group as a back-up dancer and occasional rapper, Shakur began launching a solo career.[28]

In 1991, Shakur landed a record deal with Interscope Records and released *2Pacalypse Now*.[29] Danyel Smith, the Editor-In-Chief of the hip-hop periodical *VIBE Magazine* described the album as "the words of a boy wearing of doing the 'Humpty Dance' [Digital Underground's most popular single], and tired of standing on the corner in Marin City, selling weed."[30] Shakur described his inaugural recording effort as "the story of the young black male."[31] The album featured tracks such as "Trapped," "Young Black Male," "Brenda's Got a Baby," and "Rebel of the Underground" which interrogated numerous problems confronting the black community. For example, "Trapped" described the paralyzing fear of inner-city violence ("You know they got me trapped in this prison of seclusion/Happiness, living on the streets is a delusion/Even a smooth criminal one day must get caught/Shot up or shot down with the bullet that he bought") and constant surveillance by law enforcement ("They got me trapped/Can barely walk the city streets/Without a cop harassing me, searching me/Then asking for my identity") endemic to predominantly black urban sectors at the time. Yet, the track

retains a trace of militant optimism in its chorus, "Naw, they can't keep a black man down." The album was an expression of a life lived inscribed by the mark of criminality.

It was at this early stage in Shakur's rap career that he developed the fantasy of "Thug Life." Hip-hop journalist Kevin Powell wrote in 1994,

> I think of Tupac's music: It's a cross between Public Enemy and N.W.A., between Black Power ideology and "Fuck tha Police!" realism. When he raps, Tupac is part screaming, part preaching, part talking shit. The music is dense and, at times, so loud it drowns out the lyrics. You cannot dance to it. Perhaps that is intentional.[32]

In other words, Shakur enacted the mark of criminality as a predominantly political tool, articulating political anger (Public Enemy) through street violence (N.W.A.), while also addressing specific urban problems associated with mass incarceration and capital flight. Furthermore, as Powell notes, the production in Shakur's early work stood in stark contrast to the melodic samples of the West Coast G-funk artists dominating the industry at the time. His tracks typically employed sharp, abrasive beats (e.g. "Trapped," "Young Black Male," "Holla If Ya Hear Me") or soulful beats reminiscent of socially conscious icons like Marvin Gaye (e.g. "Brenda's Got a Baby," "Dear Mama," "Keep Ya Head Up," "Me Against the World"). By bypassing the often-carnal nature of G-funk tonality, Shakur's early recordings drew more attention to his political message by invoking militant anger or community-based affect through his sampling.

Shakur imagined "Thug Life" as "a new kind of Black Power."[33] Speaking at the Indiana Black Expo in 1993, Shakur polemically declared,

> These white folks see us as thugs, I don't care what y'all think. I don't care if you think you're a lawyer, if you a man, if you an "African American," if you whatever the fuck you think you are. We thugs and niggers to these motherfuckers! You know? And until we own some shit, I'm gonna call it like it is… We thugs and we niggers until we set this shit right![34]

Shakur also devised an acronym for "Thug Life" — "the hate you gave little infants fucks everyone"—to articulate the enactment of black criminal rage toward self-emancipation.[35] "Thug Life" constituted a wholesale and political embrace of the mark of criminality. Shakur encouraged his young, black listening audience to reckon with their criminalized status by viewing it as a source of agency and upward mobility. "Thug Life" was, Shakur evidently hoped, a mechanism for unearthing the emancipatory potential residing within an expansive history of black criminalization.

The concept of "Thug Life" was understandably controversial among rap music's already forceful critics. In response, Shakur argued,

> I don't understand why America doesn't understand "Thug Life." America *is* "Thug Life"! What makes me sayin' "I don't give a fuck" different than Patrick Henry sayin' "Give me liberty or give me death"? What makes my freedom less worth fighting for than Bosnians or whoever they want to fight for this year?[36]

The gesture of inverting the fantasies of criminality and violence is consistent not only with N.W.A.'s reconfiguration of Compton as a colonized battleground, but also articulates the much broader political economy of crime and punishment described by Peter Linebaugh and others.[37] "Thug Life" was invested in politicizing those subjects and behaviors designated for incarceration and supervision, arguing forcefully that they were entirely consistent with the regimes of power occupying the upper echelons of American society. "Thug Life," in other words, hoped to highlight the hypocrisy at the core of America's political economy of crime and punishment. As he put it in on the television show *Live from LA with Tanya Hart*, "The message is that we comin'. All the people you threw away—the dope dealers, the criminals—they will be legit sitting next to you in first class thanks to your boy."[38] "Thug Life" sought to invert the hegemonic fantasies woven with the mark of criminality, enacting those racialized inscriptions toward black capital accumulation and empowerment. While, as I have noted and will at the conclusion of this

project, equating black capital accumulation with resistance holds serious limitations for emancipatory politics, "Thug Life" nonetheless created new conditions of possibility for public deliberation regarding race and criminality. Shakur was the self-fashioned savior of the mark of criminality from its entrapment within dominant American fantasies. "Thug Life" was his messianic mission.

Shakur's second album, 1993's *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.*, solidified the "Thug Life" thread that ran through his music. The track most emblematic of "Thug Life" was "Holla if You Hear Me." Sampled over a funk beat and several Public Enemy tracks, the song highlights Shakur's deep identification with his criminalized status:

> Will I quit, will I quit?/They claim that I'm violent, but still I keep/Representin', never give up, on a good thing/Wouldn't stop it if we could it's a hood thing/And now I'm like a major threat/Cause I remind you of the things you were made to forget.

Recognizing that mainstream critics of rap music marked him as criminal, Shakur espouses his investment in "reminding" his brethren of their location within the broader apparatuses of a racist society. He also jettisons any illusions of passive resistance, declaring in the song's second verse,

> Pump ya fists like this/Holla if ya hear me - PUMP PUMP if you're pissed/To the sell-outs, livin' it up/One way or another you'll be givin' it up, huh/I guess cause I'm black born/I'm supposed to say peace, sing songs, and get capped on/But it's time for a new plan, BAM!/I'll be swingin' like a one man, clan/Here we go, turn it up, don't stop/To my homies on the block getting' dropped by cops/I'm still around for ya/Keepin' my sound underground for ya.

Shakur essentially imagines himself as a messianic figure who has taken up the task of rearticulating black criminality to a righteous political project. By declaring "I'm still around for ya" and "Keepin' my sound underground for ya," Shakur functions as a self-fashioned prophet. While he is, himself, a product of the devastating conditions wrought by the 1980s and early 1990s on the African American community, Shakur positions

himself as a hermeneutic warrior, unearthing the grim truths of black urbanity and outlining a new political program enacted with and within the mark of criminality. Coupling the analysis of his radical political lineage with the racialized discourses of criminality associated with contemporary rap music, Shakur created "Thug Life" as a mechanism for functioning within society's fantasies of race and crime in hopes of "exploding" them and re-imagining black subjectivity and political practice.

PRISON, BIGGIE, AND THE DEGRADATION OF "THUG LIFE"

At the same time as he was spreading the gospel of "Thug Life," Shakur was the stuff of mainstream media sensation for his highly visible encounters with law enforcement.[39] Just as he was making a career of enacting the mark of criminality as a posture of political resistance, Shakur was, for the first time in his life, navigating the contours of the criminal justice system and doing so in a highly visible fashion.[40] As he stated in an interview, "I had no record all my life, no police record, until I made a record."[41] As with his contemporaries Snoop Doggy Dogg and Flava Flav (formerly of Public Enemy), life and art collided for Shakur at the point of racialized criminality.[42]

While the majority of Shakur's legal entanglements were settled out of court and did not result in significant jail time for the young artist, his encounter with a nineteen-year-old woman named Ayanna Jackson would dramatically change the trajectory of his life. According to Jackson, Shakur held her down while his friends sodomized her in a New York City hotel room. Shakur claims that he was asleep while the evening's events transpired. On November 31, 1994, Shakur was found guilty and sentenced to one and a half to four and a half years in prison for sexual assault.[43] After several years of carving a place for himself in the hip-hop nation, Shakur would enter prison for the first time in his

life for a crime profoundly consistent with the dominant American fantasies of race and criminality: a black man convicted of sexual assault.

In addition to his incarceration, Shakur's entanglement in the escalating feud between East Coast and West Coast rap artists further complicated the trajectory of his career and severely undermined the messianic character of "Thug Life." Arguably inaugurated with Tim Dogg's "Fuck Compton," this feud circulated around the explosion of West Coast gangsta rap in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Until this time, New York City, where hip-hop originated, dominated the scene.[44] However, with the release of *Straight Outta Compton*, the geography of hip-hop changed.[45]

For their part, many West Coast rappers felt slighted by their East Coast counterparts. During the early days of hip-hop ascension, New York-based hip-hop media like MTV, *The Source*, and *Billboard* largely ignored Los Angeles-based rap artists. Furthermore, Quinn notes that the mark of criminality so firmly affixed to Los Angeles County prompted East Coast artists to avoid touring in the area.[46] The feeling of being ignored, even amid soaring success, soured West Coast artists' and fans' attitude toward the East.[47] Many New York artists and critics dismissed West Coast rap as more sensationalistic than artistic, insisting that the East, with or without commercial success, remained the "true" home of hip-hop.[48]

Two closely intertwined forces helped propel the coastal feud into more dangerous territory. The first was an emerging profit war between the respective coasts' flagship record companies. "Suge" Knight and Dr. Dre's Death Row Records was the face of West Coast gangsta rap. Knight was already notorious for his aggressive business practices, and this reputation played a significant role in the rivalry.[49] The other label was Sean "Puff Daddy" Combs's Bad Boy Entertainment. Bad Boy rose to prominence in 1994 with the release of Notorious B.I.G.'s (a.k.a. Biggie Smalls) first album *Ready to*

Die. In addition to competing fiercely within the same market, Death Row and Bad Boy had drastically different styles. While Knight continued to deploy the gangsta ethos of Dre, Snoop, and, after signing him, Shakur, Bad Boy adopted a more lavish, club-based, and Mafioso style.[50] While many West Coast artists released "dis" tracks aimed at the East (e.g. Tha Dogg Pound's "New York, New York" and Cube's "Bow Down"), figures like Combs and Biggie often plead ignorance on the feud, dismissing it as "trivial and meaningless."[51]

Prior to his incarceration, Shakur did not claim allegiance to either coast of the hip-hop nation. However, Shakur's attitude toward the coasts changed dramatically in 1994. On November 30, the night before the verdict in his sexual assault case, Shakur went to Quad Recording Studio in Times Square to record a track for Uptown Records. While he waited for the lobby elevator, two men wearing camouflage fatigues approached the artist. They shot him repeatedly and fled with several thousand dollars worth of rings and gold chains.[52] Police believed the shooting was part of a random robbery.[53] However, in a controversial jailhouse interview with *VIBE Magazine*, Shakur implicated Combs, Biggie, and Uptown Entertainment CEO Andre Harrell in planning the attack in order to remove him from the hip-hop scene. The three men forcefully denied any involvement in the shooting.[54] However, with the release of Biggie's single "Who Shot Ya?" from his debut album *Ready to Die*, which Shakur believed was about him, as well as the shooting death of one of Knight's close associates at an Atlanta party, members and affiliates of Death Row Records increasingly implicated Bad Boy Entertainment and their allies for complicity in escalating the coastal feud.[55]

In the wake of a conviction for a crime he claimed he did not commit and a shooting he believed was planned by supposed friends, Shakur turned away from the messianic and more forcefully toward the vitriolic and paranoid. After his shooting,

Shakur commented, "If anything, my mentality is like, 'Trust nobody! Trusty no-body!' It's not like I'm untouchable; I can be killed as soon as I get out of here." From prison, he lamented, "My closest friends did me in." In light of this feeling of betrayal, Shakur sought a means of retribution. He explained, "So I just thought about, how can I make them sorry they ever did this to me? You know what I mean? How can I come back, like, fifty-times stronger and better?"[56] While the anger that fueled the politically infused "Thug Life" of Shakur's earlier work remained, it found new expression amid changing conditions. This opportunity to "come back" and redefine "Thug Life" arrived in the form of a hand-written recording contract and $1.4 million bail from one Suge Knight.[57]

The vengeful warrior, or "Thug Life" as all-out war

In October, 1995, Shakur left the Clinton Correctional Facility in New York and relocated to Los Angeles. In less than a year, he completed two albums for Death Row Records, *All Eyez on Me* and *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory*, before being fatally shot on September 7, 1996. During this period, Shakur also helped to escalate the tensions between Death Row and Bad Boy Entertainment.[58] For example, at the 1996 Soul Train Music Awards, Shakur and his posse aggressively approached Biggie and his crew. Some witnesses claimed that Shakur pointed a pistol at the New York artist and his entourage.[59] In a posthumously published interview, Shakur speaks antagonistically of Biggie:

> I have no mercy in war. I said in the beginning I was gonna take these niggas out the game, and sure enough I will. Already people can't look at Biggie and not laugh. I took every piece of his power. Anybody who tries to help him, I will destroy. Anyone who wanna side with them or do a record with them, whatever, try to unify with them, I'ma destroy. I swear to God. Can't nobody touch me right now. Maybe next month all of this will be over, but this month I'm takin' every moving target out.[60]

Shakur's words and behaviors reinforced the popular view that the coastal feud was getting out of hand.[61] They also signaled a decisive shift in the discourse of "Thug Life" from a messianic intervention in gangsta rap that directed vitriol toward the upper echelons of power to a vengeful profit-driven project that targeted rap industry rivals. "Thug Life," in other words, proved tragically malleable in the face of Shakur's personal vendettas and the commercial demands of Death Row Records.

The most potent outlet for Shakur's anger toward his enemies was his music. Both *All Eyez on Me* and *The Don Killuminati* contained tracks that posited Shakur and his allies as a thug army, orienting the mark of criminality toward market dominance and violent confrontation. This constituted a pronounced break with the messianic posture of his earlier work, even as it continued to function within the discursive resources of black criminality.

The cover photograph of *All Eyez on Me* reveals Shakur's newfound investment in the West Coast-East Coast rivalry. Sitting on a backward chair and staring into the camera, Shakur flashes the "West Side" hand signal and displays a gold chain featuring Death Row Records's coat-of-arms (an electric chair). Before the first beat or lyric, it is clear that this record is a line in the sand for the vengeful Shakur. The first track, "Ambitionz Az a Ridah," begins with several soft piano chords and Shakur lightly singing, "I won't deny it, I'm a straight ridah/You don't wanna fuck with me/Got the police bustin' at me/But they can't do nuttin' to a G." This soft incantation is proceeded by a sample of the legendary "Let's get ready to ruuumbllle!" cry of boxing announcer Michael Buffer. While the track begins as a relatively straightforward exercise in boasting ("This niggaz is jealous 'cause deep in they heart they wanna be me"), the second verse launches into far more direct territory,

> Peep it—it was my only wish to rise/Above these jealous coward mutherfuckers I despise/When it's time to ride, I was the first off this side, give me the nine/I'm ready to die right here tonight, and motherfuck they life (yeah nigga!)/That's what they screamin' as they drill me, but I'm hard to kill/So open fire, I see you kill me (that's all you niggaz got?) witness my steel/Spittin' at adversaries envious and after me/I'd rather die before they catchin' me, watch me bleed.

Shakur raps over a slow, ominous tempo. It is the sound of gathering storm of vengeance waiting to unleash righteous fury—or the rebirth of "Thug Life." Making a none-too-subtle reference to his 1994 shooting, Shakur proclaims his resilience in the face of literal bullets. He and his ravaged, criminalized body are poised for further battle, even "ready to die here tonight" if need be. The enemies in this battle, however, are not police or politicians, but other "niggaz"—presumably those on the East Coast.

One of the album's most popular tracks, "2 of Amerikaz Most Wanted," is laden with imagery and language connecting black masculinity and rap virtuosity to discourses of criminality. The most obvious is the inclusion of Shakur's fellow-Death Row artist Snoop Doggy Dogg on the track, who had recently been acquitted of murder charges brought against him during the release of *Doggystyle*. The track, thus, contained the two most criminalized rappers in the United Stats at the time. Shakur recognizes precisely this as he opens the track stating, "Ahh shit, you done fucked up now! You done put two of America's most wanted in the same motherfuckin' place, at the same motherfuckin' time, hahahahaha!" In other words, no two artists had been marked as dangerous to the same extent as Shakur and Snoop Dogg. From this inscription of criminality comes their power. Both survived the apparatus of the American criminal justice system and were now poised to enlist their criminality toward cultural production, profit accumulation and vengeance. While embracing the mark of criminality is part and parcel of Shakur's "Thug Life" ethos, the ensuing lyrics demonstrate a new and less messianic calculus of battle.

Rapped over a smooth, G-funk styled beat (signaling Shakur's investment in the cultural production of the West Coast), the two artists assert their return to gangsta dominance. In the first verse, Snoop raps,

> Sho nuff, I keep my hand on my gun, cuz they got me on the run/Now I'm back in the courtroom waitin' on the outcome/Free 2Pac, is all that's on a niggaz mind/But at the same time it seem they tryin' to take mine/So I'ma get smart, and get defensive and shit/And put together a million march, for some gangsta shit.

Invoking the collective memory of Farrakhan's Million Man March, Snoop articulates the Nation of Islam's message of collective self-care to the gangsta life, insisting on the need to "get defensive and shit." Near the end of the track, "Free 2Pac" raps, "Now give me fifty feet/Defeat is not my destiny, release me to the streets/And keep whatever's left of me/Jealousy is misery, suffering is grief/Better be prepared when you cowards fuck wit' me." Later, he declares, "They wonder how I live, with five shots/Niggaz is hard to kill, on my block." Drawing explicitly from his experience in the prison system and at the hands of his assailants, Shakur sounds like a man prepared to do damage to his rivals. While this might easily be read within the confines of virtuosity and the recording studio, such taunts are also inseparable from the very real violence unfolding at the time of this single's release (e.g. the shooting death of Knight's friend and associate in Atlanta and a drive-by shooting allegedly targeting Death Row artists during a New York video shoot).[62]

The song's popular video importantly adds to its criminal element, as well as its articulation of "Thug Life" to the East Coast-West Coast feud. It portrays Snoop Dogg and Shakur donning mafia-style suits and dining on a whole roasted pig, sipping champagne, smoking cigars, and enjoying the company of their posse and beautiful women. A large portion of the video also includes a dramatic courtroom scene in which the two men throw down verses as if they were oral arguments to the judge and jury.

Dyson suggests that the use of a classical *gangster* motif is intended to highlight the hypocrisy of mainstream criticisms of *gangsta's* supposed indulgences and irresponsibility. By embodying the likes of *The Godfather*, James Cagney, and other celebrated pop culture icons, the video functions as a parodic testament to the double standards associated with race, profit, and criminality in America.[63] In this light, "2 of Amerikaz Most Wanted" retains the messianic potential of "Thug Life" before Shakur's shooting and incarceration.

However, the video also makes unmistakable reference to Shakur's belief that Bad Boy Entertainment was responsible for his shooting. The video's opening scene portrays an office conversation between "Piggy" and "Buff," two clear parodies of Biggie and Combs. They enthusiastically discuss their ability to dominate the hip-hop scene now that "he's gone, baby!" A bloodied and bandaged Shakur enters the room flanked by two bodyguards to confront the dumbfounded East Coat rappers. Shakur assures them that he is not going to kill them, explaining, "I ain't gonna kill you. We was homeboys once, Pig. Once we homeboys, we always homeboys." However, given this prelude's reference to Biggie and Combs, the presence of a roasted pig on Shakur and Snoop Dogg's table throughout the video takes on a new meaning. It is as if the two key struggles in Shakur's life—that with the legal system and with Bad Boy Entertainment—converge within the sign of the roasted pig. The swine simultaneously represents its traditional referent, police officers and the prison-industrial complex *writ large* (given the video's setting in a courtroom and a closing police chase), and the famously overweight Notorious B.I.G., or "Piggie." With this single visual gesture, Shakur redraws the battle lines of the hip-hop nation, placing the despised police and the East Coast in the same camp and making it perfectly clear that he intends to "roast" both. Bad Boy's supposed violence against Shakur's body is indistinguishable from the institutional violence of American law

enforcement. “Thug Life” becomes a war against all of *Shakur’s* enemies, as opposed to a messianic critique of the social structures associated with racism and mass incarceration that do violence to the African American community as a whole.

While “2 of Amerikaz Most Wanted” helped raise the stakes of the coastal feud and Shakur’s role therein, no track placed the rivalry outside the bounds of traditional rap “dis” tracks more than “Hit ‘Em Up.” Although it was not featured on *All Eyez on Me*, proper, Death Row released “Hit ‘Em Up” as a b-side to the Shakur best-selling single “How Do U Want It.” It is difficult to overstate the track’s ferocity. Forman writes, “While the ‘battle on wax’ was within the parameters of acceptable rap practices, the track’s vitriol and expressed bitterness left little doubt of Tupac’s seething anger and volatility as a soldier defending Death Row’s reputation and integrity.”[64] Quinn, however, doubts the track’s place within the traditions of hip-hop, writing, “‘Hit ‘em Up’ went beyond the usual ‘dis’ record motivated it seemed by a desire to raise Cain and by brutal rivalry.”[65]

Rapped over an accelerated sample of Dennis Edwards and Siedah Garrett’s soul duet “Don’t Look Any Further,” the track begins with Shakur declaring in a dismissive tone, “I ain’t got no motherfuckin’ friends/That’s why I fucked yo’ bitch, you fat motherfucker!”—and so begins an unambiguous diatribe against Biggie, Combs, and any and all affiliates of Bad Boy Records. In the first verse, Shakur raps,

> First off, fuck your bitch and the click you claim/Westside when we ride come equipped with game/You claim to be a player but I fucked your wife/We bust on Bad Boy niggaz fucked for life/Plus Puffy tryin’ ta see me weak hearts I rip/Biggie Smalls and Junior M.A.F.I.A. some mark-ass bitches/We keep on comin’ while we runnin’ for yo' jewels/Steady gunnin’, keep on bustin’ at them fools, you know the rules.

In addition to assailing all Bad Boy-affiliated artists, Shakur makes the controversial gesture of claiming to have slept with Faith Evans, Biggies’s ex-wife.[66] Shakur is not

only attacking the artists' strengths as a rapper, but also severing his claim to sexual prowess, one of the chief gestures of gangsta rap. He claims the talent and the libido in this epic battle. Furthermore, Shakur brags that he and Death Row will be "runnin' for yo' jewels" and rob Bad Boy Records of their capital accumulation in the hip-hop market. Thus, two signifiers of black criminality—accumulation and sexuality—function as sources of power and struggle in this epic coastal battle.

The track proceeds to attack Biggie for his weight ("Get out the way yo', get out the way yo'/Biggie Smalls just got dropped"), as well as East Coast group Mobb Deep for their youth ("You little young-as motherfuckers/Don't one of you niggaz got sickle cell or somethin'?"), eviscerating all East Coast affiliations:

> Now when I came out I told you it was just about Biggie/Then everybody had to open they mouth with a motherfuckin' opinion/Well this how we gon' do this/Fuck Mobb Deep, Fuck Biggie, Fuck Bad Boy as a staff record label/And as a motherfuckin' crew/And if you wanna be down with Bad Boy; then fuck you too!/Chino XL, fuck you too!/All you motherfuckers, fuck you too!

The song's chorus is a mocking play on Junior M.A.F.I.A.'s "Player's Anthem" ("Grab your dick if you love hip-hop/Rub your titties if you love Big Poppa") and, again, implicates Bad Boy in his shooting, singing, "Grab ya glocks, when you see Tupac/Call the cops, when you see Tupac, uhh/Who shot me, but ya punks didn't finish/Now ya 'bout to feel the wrath of a menace/NIGGA, I hit em' up." The query "Who shot me?" is, of course, a reference to Biggies's own controversial track "Who Shot Ya?" By situating "Hit 'Em Up" around his wounded body, Shakur ups the ante of his antagonistic rap, converging the industrial and the personal into an epic battle waged with the criminalized signifiers of gangsta—guns, money, and women. By encouraging all in his path to "grab ya glocks" and "call the cops," Shakur enacts the mark of criminality as a vengeful, profit-driven force to be reckoned with, rather than a messianic intervention in dominant

fantasies of moral panic and mass incarceration. He believes he has been wronged and wants to settle accounts in the studio and, if necessary (and we do not know whether or not to believe him—which is perhaps one of Shakur's greatest rhetorical strengths) by way of the gun.

Shakur's fantasy of vengeance continues, but takes a more haunting form in *The Don Killuminati*. The album's first two tracks deal specifically with the feuds Shakur began addressing in *All Eyez on Me*. The introduction to the album's first song, "Bomb First (My Second Reply)" consists of a mock newscaster, over the solemn sound of church bells, announcing the release of Shakur's new album "under the alias Makaveli." The newscaster reports that the release has prompted "a number of less fortunate rappers [to join] together in conspiracy to assassinate the character of not only Mr. Shakur, but of Death Row Records as well." The reporter then explains, "The question everybody wants to know is—why'd they get this nigga started?" A supposed released statement from the elusive rapper follows: "It's not about East or West. It's about niggaz and bitches, power and money, riders and punks. Which side are you on?" We then hear the sound of a pistol being loaded and repeatedly discharged. Shakur screams, "These niggaz is still fuckin' talkin'? You niggaz still breathin'? Fuckin' roaches, a'ight. A'ight, it's the Raid for you cockroaches." Although he has changed his name (and, at the time of the album's release, Shakur is literally deceased), his vengeful spirit has not waned. He is back to settle more accounts wielding guns, power, libido, and money. "Thug Life" has become a tool for settling personal accounts.

Throughout "Bomb First (My Second Reply)," Shakur boasts of his artistic superiority to other rap artists, claiming, "I hit the scene, niggaz duckin' from my guillotine stare" and "Extreme venom, no mercy when we all up in 'em/Cut 'em down, to Hell is where we send 'em." He also identifies specific and familiar enemies:

> Bye bye bye, let's get high and ride/Oh, how do we do these niggaz but I'm not gon' cry/I'm a Bad Boy killa, Jay-Z die too /Lookin' out for Mobb Deep, nigga when I find you/Weak motherfuckers don't deserve to breathe/How many niggaz down to die for me? Yeahh-yeayy!/West coast ridah, comin' right behind ya/Should've never fucked wit' meeee/I want money hoes sex and weeeed/I won't rest till my road dawgs freeee, bomb first!

Making references to "Hit 'Em Up" ("I'm a Bad Boy Killa") and "Ambitionz Az a Ridah" ("West coast Ridah, comin' right at ya/Should've never fucked wit' meeee"), Shakur suggests a continual thread of vengeance, insisting that he is still out for blood and still, he believes, on top. "Thug Life" remains, at this juncture in Shakur's career, a fantasy of vengeance waged upon a coastal battlefield where one is either with him ("How many niggas down to die for me?") or against him—precisely the kind of injunction a messiah might make to his apostles.

The album's second track, "Hail Mary" begins with a deep bass and slow tempo; what one of the album's engineers described as "a hip-hop funeral."[67] Shakur enters the track with a loud, gravely incantation accompanied by the chorus "Come with me, Hail Mary/Run quick see, what do we have here/Now, do you wanna ride or die?/La dadada, la la la la":

> Makaveli in this... Killuminati, all through your body/The blow's like a twelve gauge shotty/Uhh, feel me!/And God said he should send his one begotten son/To lead the wild into the ways of the man/Follow me; eat my flesh, flesh and my flesh.

Shakur's unmistakably messianic posture ("one begotten son," "follow me," "eat my flesh") is also present on the album's provocative cover, which portrays a nude Shakur crucified on a cross. With these twin gestures—one lyrical and on visual—Shakur mythologizes his preoccupation with vengeance. While the 2Pac of *All Eyez on Me* was angry and out for revenge, Makaveli is a Christ-like figure reminiscent of the Book of Revelation, issuing his final judgment on those who had transgressed him. He and his

"Thug Army's" righteous war has saturated the industry and transcended the flesh. This messianic rhetoric, however, is different from that advocated by Benjamin. Whereas the early messianism of "Thug Life" critically intervened in dominant fantasies of racialized criminality for the sake of a larger community, the messianic posture of *Don Killuminati* remains invested in the more venal vendettas and aspirations of Shakur and Death Row Records.

The song's first verse situates Makaveli as a warrior engaged in an apocalyptic struggle against an army of darkness:

> I ain't a killer but don't push me/Revenge is like the sweetest joy next to getting' pussy/Picture paragraphs unloaded, wise words bein' quoted/Peeped the weakness in the rap game and sewed it/Bow down, pray to God hoping that he's listenin'/Seein' niggaz comin' for me, to my diamonds, when they glistenin'/Now pay attention, rest in peace father/I'm a ghost in these killin' fields.

Here is a Shakur that is still vengeful and convinced of his virtuosity ("Picture paragraphs unloaded, wise words bein' quoted"), but also tormented. Turning to prayer as he languishes in "killing fields," Shakur has seemingly stepped outside the bounds of his personal and commercial feuds, but now operates within the realm of the spiritual. This distinct variation on the themes of *All Eyez on Me* takes on additional salience given the album's release *following* Shakur's shooting death in Las Vegas.

This notion of revenge beyond the grave resonates with the music video for "Hail Mary." Shakur does not appear in the video, but haunts it. The track plays over the muted events of a dark, stormy evening at a mansion occupied by three young African American men. The video intermittingly shows a solitary young black man in prison, anguishing over a photograph of himself and the deceased Shakur. Early in the video, the camera cuts to a dark cemetery where lightning strikes a gravestone marked "Makaveli, 1971-1996." The ground subsequently shakes as the deceased Makaveli presumably (we never

see him) rises from the grave. The rest of the video unfolds as the always off-camera specter systematically murders the three men in the mansion, indicating that they are complicit in his death and the broader crimes of the East Coast. The segment closes with Shakur's ally in prison reading a newspaper headline announcing the deaths. The messianic Makaveli had risen from the grave to restore justice and his languishing apostle is now receiving the good news.

"Hail Mary" in its entirety constitutes an enactment of the mark of criminality within the master narrative of New Testament mythology, in which the slain prophet promises justice and comfort for those he left behind and righteous retribution for those who have crossed him. Makaveli is a new kind of messiah, constructing fantasies of black criminality not for the emancipation of a people, but in order to settle personal and professional accounts.

Standing as his last living testament to the hip-hop nation, *The Don Killuminati* also represents a culmination of "Thug Life." While the motif began as a highly politicized enactment of the mark of criminality, its entanglements within the rap music industry quickly distorted its emancipatory potential and, consequentially, Shakur's status as a messianic figure. Where the "Thug Life" of his earlier work advanced a reconceptualization of black criminality as a resource for critique and resistance, Shakur's deployment of the motif following his incarceration directed it toward his gangsta rap brethren. Shakur began leading his flock toward a potentially progressive reconceptualization of black criminality, but ended his life leading them into a battle he and his corporate accomplices helped wage. However, "Thug Life" did not die with Shakur that September night in Las Vegas. Rather, it became a source of mainstream rhetorical invention as Shakur and his legacy became domesticated within popular public memory.

DISCIPLINING "THUG LIFE": THE "LESSONS" OF TUPAC SHAKUR

Almost immediately after he was critically wounded in a drive-by shooting in Las Vegas, legions of press and supporters rushed to University Medical Center not only to observe Shakur's condition, but to begin the long process of inscribing meaning, once again, upon his bullet-ridden body.[68] In an otherwise spiteful and dismissive article in the conservative magazine *The American Spectator*, author Mark Styen makes the astute, if polemical, observation, "[As] surgeons cut open [Shakur's] 'Thug Life' tattoo to get at the three bullets inside him, Jesse Jackson and the Nation of Islam were both in attendance at the hospital, laying claim to his legacy."[69] An analysis of print media in the year following Shakur's death reveals a complex hegemonic struggle over his legacy, that of Notorious B.I.G. (who was fatally shot in Los Angeles less than one year following Shakur's death), and, ultimately, the destiny of a criminalized generation. The result, I argue, was the disciplining and domestication of "Thug Life" within public memory that seeks to eradicate any messianic potential residing therein.

The most prevalent reading of Shakur's demise was the question of whether young African Americans would "learn the lesson" implicit in the rapper's death. In an article announcing Shakur's passing, the *Chicago Sun-Times* wrote, "Tupac Shakur, the rapper whose raw lyrics seemed a blueprint of his own violent life, died Friday from wounds suffered in a drive-by shooting."[70] His death, in effect, was the logical conclusion of his "Thug Life." As one fan commented following his death, "He had a big mouth. He was always running off his mouth." Another noted, "He pumped 'Thug Life' to its fullest."[71] Indeed, his demise came from one of the chief signifiers of racialized criminality: the drive-by shooting.

The belief that Shakur's music and lifestyle foreshadowed his violent death led many journalists and commentators to, like Shakur himself, posit the slain rapper's body

as synecdoche for young African Americans in general. For example, Shakur's attorney, Shawn S. Chapman, lamented the violent and sensationalistic character of his client's death, telling the *New York Times*, "There was this wonderful, charming, bright, talented, funny person that no one is going to get to know; they are just going to know this other side. Hopefully, this will have some positive effect on people—the gang members—who are shooting each other."[72] Brad Krevoy, who produced the Shakur film *Gang Related*, asked, "Is there anything positive that can be learned from a tragedy like this? Hopefully, kids can learn from it."[73] *The Washington Post* commented in its obituary that Shakur and other gangsta rappers were "selling many young people a lifestyle leading only to an early grave, life behind bars or a place in the growing urban armies of young people disabled by gunfire." The article also commented, "[Shakur's 'Thug Life'] movement had nothing to offer his would-be followers except an eventual return ticket to jail." The piece's author, Esther Iverem, ponders the implications of Shakur's problematic message, noting, "Well-to-do kids, white and black, could flirt with these images, then head off to college. But for kids without this option, the images were powerfully seductive. Tupac's death showed that 'realness' is not invincible—but will the message get through?"[74] By reading Shakur's death in such tragic terms, the political content of "Thug Life" vanishes within an injunction to abandon—rather than interrogate—all notions of black criminality, diluting its messianic potential.

Writing for the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, high-school student Robin Moppins espouses precisely the lesson others' hoped young teenagers would learn from Shakur's violent death. Moppins writes, "The death of Tupac Shakur made me see that living in the fast lane can lead to a fast and senseless death." The article continues, "Shakur's death was a wake-up call for teens everywhere, because so many are very loyal fans."[75] Writing

for the African American magazine *Essence*, Darrell Dawsey expresses doubt that young blacks will "wake-up" amid Shakur's death. He argues,

> On the airwaves, however, the hip-hop community expressed hope that Pac's death would be a "wake-up call." I don't see that happening. Not because I don't think we can stop the violence. We can. But alarms for my generation have been going off for more than a decade. If seeing our closest childhood friends with their chests opened by Mac-10 fire hasn't shaken us out of a gangsta stupor, what can we glean from the brutal murder of a superstar we knew only in CD format?[76]

He continues, "What we need is the courage to wake up. But waking up will require sacrifice from a generation too hell-bent on accumulating," and asks, "Who's going to take the weekends off to organize food and clothing drives, the free-Mumia [Abu Jamal] campaigns, the African-centered independent schools?"[77] Shortly following Shakur's death, the Nation of Islam held a "peace meeting" designed to "give some clarity to his life so [his admirers] won't immortalize the worst of him and try to imitate that."[78] The following year, the organization sponsored a rap concert as "an effort to end violence among rap artists and their fans" following Shakur and Biggie's deaths.[79]

A great deal can be said about the articulation of Shakur's death within a discourse of lesson learning. It is, of course, reasonable to hope that youth might use Shakur's death as an opportunity to launch a more sober assessment of "Thug Life." However, it is problematic to suggest that, in the wake of the rapper's demise, it is now up to young black youth to emerge triumphantly from the abyss of "Thug Life." As Dana Cloud has noted, such rhetorics of personal responsibility can domesticate social issues, obscuring the role of social structures in producing crime and poverty.[80] However, Shakur's death nonetheless functioned as an opportunity to deconstruct the sensationalism of "Thug Life," recognizing its many contradictions and, perhaps most importantly, its status as a commodity marketed to working class and poor youth. Black poet Kenneth Carroll wrote of Shakur's death,

> It says clearly that we cannot afford to be minstrels for dollars or our own dreams of stardom. His death was a lamentable loss of a gifted, misguided, young poet who spoke with insight and energy to his hip-hop world, but who committed the unpardonable sin of using his immense poetic talents to degrade and debase the very people who needed his positive words most—his fans.[81]

Tupac Shakur's death *did* serve as an object lesson for the "Thug Life." The question is precisely how one chooses to interpret "Thug Life" and the nature of that lesson. If one chooses to resituate the death of this black artist within hegemonic fantasies of degraded black criminality and personal responsibility, then there is no lesson, per se, but only the reification of the mark of criminality's stifling grip on poor and working class African American life. If, however, this 1996 shooting enables a contextualization of Shakur's body within the social structures that produce criminality and the commodity relations that market it, then his death and "Thug Life" may speak volumes about the potential for reflection and political practice in their wake. Such a gesture would undoubtedly be messianic.

Young African Americans, however, were not the only ones who stood to learn a lesson from Shakur's demise. Many commentators saw his shooting as a moment of reckoning for the genre of gangsta rap and the hip-hop nation as a whole—a falling action following the build of N.W.A. and the climax of the G-funk era. Immediately following Shakur's death, the world of Death Row Records began to crumble. Earlier in the Las Vegas evening of Shakur's death, the artist, along with Suge Knight and their posse, savagely beat a young man who many believe was responsible for killing the rapper later that night. Knight's involvement in the fight constituted a parole violation that led to a nine-year prison sentence. As *VIBE* reported, "The one-time baller extraordinaire is likely to serve about four years of the nine-year sentence. Meanwhile, the FBI and other federal agencies are investigating Death Row for money laundering

and involvement with drugs."[82] The one-time dominant record company was fading quickly.

Following the March 9, 1997 shooting death of Biggie in Los Angeles, *The Washington Post* commented, "The deaths of two of its most talented artists has become a sad endgame for the genre dubbed by the media and music industry as 'gangsta rap'."[83] In an article entitled "Does Rap Have a Future?," Joy Bennett Kinnon wrote for *Ebony*, "Hip-hop's recent adventures have been so chilling that even its founders are concerned about its future," adding, "The music is still young—so young most of its veterans haven't yet hit 40. And some of its stars never will." The article proceeds to provide comments from black music patriarch Quincy Jones, mainstream rapper and actor Will Smith, as well as cultural critics like C. Delores Tucker and Michael Eric Dyson, all of whom offer somber, and occasionally nuanced, assessments of a genre-gone-wrong.[84] Following the death of Shakur, and particularly after Biggie's similar fate less than one year later, public representations of gangsta rap and hip-hop portray a form of cultural expression at war with itself.

Beyond the industry as a whole, Shakur and Biggie's deaths also prompted the rhetorical work of constituting a cast of characters within the domain of gangsta rap, proper. Specifically, the ways in which Shakur, Knight, Biggie, Combs, as well as figures like Snoop Doggy Dogg and Dr. Dr were portrayed represented efforts to articulate the lessons of the violence and contemplate potential trajectories for gangsta's future. Specifically, the question loomed: Who will learn the lessons of "Thug Life's" limits and who shall perish? As I note above, a popular consensus existed that Shakur had fallen prey to the perils of "Thug Life." Although his death was to be read as tragic, it was also inevitable given his propensity for extremes (as opposed to the martyred death of a messiah).

Notorious B.I.G., on the other hand, was largely represented as a redeemed "thug." Shortly after his death, *Jet* documents several interviews Biggie conducted before the fatal L.A. shooting. For example, the magazine reports,

> He said his new album was done by a changed man. "(My friends), we all have kids now," he told the *L.A. Times* only days before his death. "These aren't the same brothers on the corner, not caring about living or dying. I wanna see my kids graduate, I want to go to my daughter's wedding and my son's wedding, and I want to watch them get old. You're not going to get to see that if you're out there wilding."[85]

However, the article cannot say the same for Shakur:

> A poem reportedly written by Shakur offers a different view.
>
> "When my heart can beat no more/I hope I die for a principle or a belief that I have lived for/I will die before my time because/I already feel the shadow's depth . . ."
>
> And the tattoos on his body form a story too. Reports say one was of a panther about to strike; one was an AK-47; on his stomach he had the words THUG LIFE, with the letter I formed by a bullet.[86]

Thus, while Shakur perished in the abyss of a wayward path he had chosen, Biggie had made a good-faith effort to change course. In the opening of his obituary for Biggie in *Newsweek*, John Leland writes,

> Christopher Wallace went to Los Angeles in early February looking to relax. Wallace, best known as rapper the Notorious B.I.G., or Biggie Smalls, was eager to get clear of New York. There were assault charges and drug charges and weapons charges, a marriage in the final stages of dissolution: just too much drama. And he loved L.A., loved the sun and the women, the life. He stayed at the mansion of his friend, Motown CEO Andre Harrell. He had received death threats, but, according to a friend, "he didn't sweat it, because he figured it was just 'player-hater' stuff"—petty jealousy. In any case, the friend says, he had hired some Crips for security. Life was good. He was pushing for a movie deal, a TV deal, a book deal; he wanted to become a household celebrity like the Fresh Prince. He called his upcoming album "Life After Death," his deliverance from the turmoil of his past.[87]

The tragic and ironic ending of this teaser is, of course, Biggie's death on that very trip. While Shakur's "Thug Life" predictably caught up with him, Biggie was tragically ensnared in the criminal fantasies he tried to leave behind. Biggie was portrayed as hip-hop's Prodigal Son, while Shakur was its fallen, failed messiah.

Other artists at the center or periphery of the coastal feud and its accompanying violence were also the subjects of considerable discussion. For example, in a wide-ranging discussion with *Interview* magazine, Snoop Dogg indicated that he was departing the so-called gangsta lifestyle. The article opens with the observation, "After a tumultuous year, rap superstar and gangsta icon Snoop Doggy Dogg is showing signs that he's moving on from the tough talk made his rhymes famous." In addition to losing his friend and collaborator Shakur, Snoop Dogg was also recovering from a protracted murder trial. He commented, "I had to deal with the pressure of someone's death and being held responsible for it. That's nothing to brag about. But it also helped me develop as a man. It taught me to respect life and understand that I now have a son who needs me to provide direction."[88]

Dr. Dre left Death Row Records shortly before Shakur's fatal shooting. A *Newsweek* article on his first post-Death Row album comments,

> Both Dre's professional resume and personal rap sheet—breaking another producer's jaw, hitting a cop, slamming a female talk-show host into a wall—make [forthcoming single] "Been There, Done That" a remarkable departure. It's an explicit renunciation not only of actual violence but also of the violent language that made him his multimillions: "A million motherf---ers on the planet Earth/Talk that hard bulls--t 'cause that's all they're worth" [*sic*].[89]

The article continues, explaining that Dre's considerable talent was undermined by the stigma associated with Knight, Shakur, and others at Death Row. Dre explained, "There was a lot of negative stuff going on there that had nothing to do with the music, and I wasn't comfortable with it."[90] Both Dre and Snoop Dogg were "growing up" in the

shadow of Shakur's death and the subsequent decline of Death Row Records. They were leaving the danger and foolishness of "Thug Life" behind, exiting the criminal enterprise of capital accumulation and pursuing more respectable means of generating a profit.

The central villain of the fallout associated with Shakur, and eventually Biggie's death, was Suge Knight. While a feature article from *Newsweek* posits Sean "Puffy" Combs as the heir apparent to Motown Records founder Berry Gordy, Jr., the consensus on Knight, particularly following Shakur's death, was that he represented all that was rotten about gangsta rap.[91] A *USA Today* article published shortly after Shakur's death opens, "Rapper Vanilla Ice is scared. Record promoter Doug Young has left the business. Music exec Jerry Heller carries a gun."[92] An anonymous black record executive commented for *Newsweek*, "I've never had problems with him, but I was told at one point to hire security because of he and his crew. *He is singlehandedly [sic] holding black music hostage*."[93]

The same article suggests that Shakur might have followed a more wholesome path following his prison release were it not for his financial indebtedness to Knight, who paid his bail in exchange for a record contract. A *Washington Post* review of *The Don Killuminati* argues that Shakur's music contained considerable complexity prior to signing with Death Row, but, "After that, Shakur fell into Death Row's nihilist aesthetic headfirst."[94] Reports following Shakur's death even speculated that his assailant's bullets were intended for Knight, given the producer's many entanglements in the gang scene.[95] Thus, the tapestry of events and personalities circulating around Tupac Shakur's murdered body all return to a common, treacherous starting point—Suge Knight functions as the Judas of Shakur and the hip-hop nation.

Commenting on the impending demise of Death Row Records, hip-hop journalist Rob Marriott wrote,

> With the death of Tupac Shakur and the possible demise of Death Row, it's become obvious to anyone paying attention that the gangsta image—for all its force and bluster—is nothing if not tragic, a myth of empowerment with the capacity to rob our generation of its potential greatness. Tupac's story has quickly become our story: a tragic and twisted turn-of-the-millennium morality tale that seems to have no end. If we as a Hip Hop Nation can ever move beyond the directionless violence and self-destruction gangsta sometimes glorifies, then maybe we'll have 'Pac to thank for that. Perhaps, in the end, he was simply a sacrificial lamb in thug's clothing.[96]

Marriott, along with many others, was anxious to find meaning within the slain body of one of hip-hop's most visible and controversial figures. Most agreed that Shakur's death, as well as Biggies's, constituted a bold and sobering testament to the tragic implications of gangsta's indulgences. Both fans and artists were left with a choice as they gazed upon Shakur's fallen *corpus*: wake up or perish. Many, according to mainstream accounts, chose to "wake up" and pursue alternative routes of capital accumulation and expression. Others in this narrative, particularly Suge Knight, perished.

Absent in this morality play, however, was a sustained effort to resuscitate the messianic potential at play in Shakur's early articulations of "Thug Life." For mainstream journalists, the death of Shakur represented a final verdict on an industry and genre that had become thoroughly saturated with the mark of criminality. Rather than posing a complex challenge to dominant fantasies of racialized criminality, gangsta rap had become enfolded therein. The resistant enactment had, in this rendering, become a reification of such fantasies, as Death Row Records stood as the racial criminal threat while others, including Combs, Dre, Snoop Dogg, even Biggie, found refuge within more acceptable terrains.

"THUG LIFE'S" POST-MORTEM

This chapter has discussed the articulation of black criminality through the late Tupac Shakur's fantasy of "Thug Life." By charting the theme's emergence in his early

recordings and its rearticulation to the coastal feud of the late 1990s, I have noted how "Thug Life" represented a potential messianic intervention in gangsta rap, only to become distorted through its entanglement in the rap industry. Furthermore, following Shakur's violent death in 1996, "Thug Life" became an object of popular public memory that was subordinated to dominant fantasies of racialized criminality. Rather than envisioning Shakur's demise and the discourse of "Thug Life" as a source for public deliberation and political practice regarding the prison-industrial complex, mainstream rhetors domesticated Shakur within a discourse of personal responsibility and "learning the lessons" associated with the rapper's violent "lifestyle." Thus, while "Thug Life" possessed the potential to "explode" the continuum of racial discourses of crime in the United States, it ultimately fell prey to its chief prophet's own limitations, as well as the hegemony of popular deployments of the mark of criminality.

As he closes his analysis of Benjamin's "messianic Marxism," Michael Löwy writes, "Whenever we are looking at the past or the future, the opening-up of history in Walter Benjamin is inseparable from an ethical, social and political decision to support the victims of oppression and those who fight that oppression."[97] In other words, it is not enough to simply intervene in the trajectory of history and imagine the great unsettling of dominant discourses as an emancipatory act all its own. Rather, such a gesture must be accompanied by an ethical imperative toward concrete social change. While all destabilizations are *potentially* progressive, they are not necessarily so. Indeed, the story of gangsta rap, in general, and Tupac Shakur, in particular, attest to precisely this.

As I have argued above, the story of "Thug Life" is bound up in the story of Shakur. With origins in the artist's black radical heritage, its early manifestations were pregnant with promise. This variation of "Thug Life" simultaneously embraced the mark of criminality for racialized subjects, while recognizing such a discourse's location in

broader social structures of exploitation and oppression. "Thug Life" functioned as a militant political strategy dispersed through the cultural landscape of the hip-hop nation. However, Shakur's project changed dramatically after he joined the ranks of Death Row Records. The hand-written contract the young rapper signed with Suge Knight was, according to many in the industry, profoundly abusive and opportunistic given Shakur's desperate circumstances.[98] Aside from signing his artistic and financial autonomy away, however, Shakur also signed away much of the emancipatory potential of "Thug Life." Indeed, prior to his affiliation with Knight and Death Row, Shakur indicated that he intended to abandon "Thug Life" altogether, commenting from prison,

> I'm going to start an organization called Us First. I'm going to save these young niggas, because nobody else want to save them. Nobody ever came to save me. They just watch what happen to you. That's why Thug Life to me is dead. If it's real, then let somebody else represent it, because I'm tired of it. I represented it too much. I was Thug Life. I was the only nigga out there putting my life on the line.[99]

Suspecting that "Thug Life" was colliding with the limitations of the music industry and his own relationship to the law, Shakur allegedly sought alternative mechanisms for addressing African American youth operating within the discursive and material terrain of criminality. While we can only speculate about Shakur's motivations following his release, it seems the desperation accompanying his incarceration and the opportunity presented by Knight prompted a reappraisal of the rapper's relationship to the hip-hop nation. His reinvention of "Thug Life" fit nicely within the broader gangsta ethos of Death Row Records and the emerging coastal feud. It is telling that Knight chose to pursue a contract with Shakur only after he was convicted of sexual assault and involved in a high-profile feud with fellow rap artists he believed had shot him. Just as Löwy notes about all messianic interventions, Shakur's potential to rescue the mark of criminality

from the brutal logic of capital was only as strong as its capacity to circumvent that very logic.

The relative demise of "Thug Life" within the structures of hip-hop commerce poses a grander question about the role of crime in political resistance—a question that permeates this entire project. While several authors have situated criminal practice within class conflict and envisioned it as a form of resistance, Paul Hirst cautions against valorizing society's criminals as heroic or revolutionary figures. He writes, "The criminal career and the delinquent's solution, however much enforced by the harsh necessities of capitalism, are not in effect forms of political rebellion against the existing order but a more or less reactionary accommodation to them."[100] Much like the inner city gangs of the 20th Century mirrored the practices of capital, so too did the articulation of "Thug Life" through gangsta rap fall prey to the trappings of the market.[101] The result was a vitriolic criminal project that targeted other black artists rather than the social structures that had criminalized a generation. As Kevin Powell pondered at the height of Death Row's notoriety and success, "When a people feel like social, political, or economic outcasts, it gets easier to consider taking one another out—even over the pettiest beefs—in the name of survival."[102] Absent a more coherent analysis of criminality and political organizing outside of the recording studio, a cultural politics grounded in criminality was, perhaps, doomed to failure.

This is not to suggest that Shakur's musical efforts on Death Row Records were entirely void of powerful political potential, any more than his earlier work was without its ambivalences. For example, *All Eyez on Me* contained two powerful and moving tracks paying homage to the criminalized generation consuming his work. "Life Goes On" eloquently explored the precarious relationship many black youth had to their mortality ("How many brothas fell victim to tha streetz?/Rest in peace young nigga,

there's a Heaven for a 'G'/Be a lie, If I told ya that I never thought of death/My niggas, we tha last ones left"), while "I Ain't Mad at Cha" contemplated forgiveness for those who left the "'hood" ("So many questions, and they ask me if I'm still down/I moved up out of the ghetto, so I ain't real now?/They got so much to say, but I'm just laughin' at cha/You niggaz just don't know, but I ain't mad at cha). Rapped over soaring, soulful beats, such tracks suggest that, even as he was complicit in provoking a feud that divided young black artists and their fans, Shakur retained an investment in those whose fate hung in the balance amid decades of moral panic surrounding race and crime in America.

My project is also, however, invested in the notion that even the most noxious texts contain an element of emancipatory political potential. Can this much be said about the East Coast-West Coast feud? Jameson argues that ideology emerges in response to the righteous anger and potential solidarity of exploited and oppressed classes. Indeed, as my discussion of racism and fantasy suggests, discursive divisions typically function to obscure potential grounds for solidarity. As a result, they retain a utopian residue precisely because they appeal to an outrage stemming from subjects' shared relationships to social structures, even as they misdirect them. Thus, while a track like "Hit 'Em Up" is primarily an invective against other black artists capable of fomenting divisions among black rap music fans in general, scholars might read the pleasure associated with listening to such tracks in a more optimistic manner. Can an anger fueled by the discursive regime of signifiers associated with black criminality function as an outlet for the rage of a criminalized generation without falling prey to the perils of industry? In other words, might the outrage that propelled hateful rhetoric toward the East Coast be redirected toward institutional regimes of power? Furthermore, given that Shakur's public memory still looms large in the hip-hop nation, might a messianic gesture rescue this complicated artist's own progressive potential from domestication?[103] Benjamin would likely argue

that the answer to such a question hinges on the capacity of a messianic movement to reconfigure the equation of black criminal rage in the service of a political project capable of challenging the very foundations of our carceral society.

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[1] Dyson 2001, 209.
[2] See, for example, Lee 1996.
[3] Barnes 1998.
[4] Giovanni 1997, 5. Lower-case in original.
[5] Beason 2004.
[6] Tucker even sued Shakur's estate following his death, claiming polemical lyrics he had written about her negatively impacted her and her husband's sex life. McShane 1997.
[7] Forman 2003.
[8] Gewertz 2003.
[9] "Tupac: Resurrection" 2009.
[10] Quinn 2005, 180.
[11] Dyson 2001.
[12] Jameson 1981; 1992.
[13] de Certeau 1988.
[14] Löwy 2005.
[15] Emphasis in original. Benjamin 2003a, 391.
[16] DeChaine 2000, 301.
[17] Benjamin 2003a, 392, 397, 395.
[18] de Certeau 1988, 4.
[19] Benjamin 2003a, 396.
[20] See West 1999a; 1999b.
[21] Moses 1982, 4.
[22] Bacon 2002, 78. On the prophetic tradition in social movements generally, see Darsey 1997
[23] Powell 1998d. On COINTELPRO, see, Churchill and Wall 2002.
[24] Lazin 2003.
[25] Lazin 2003.
[26] Powell 1998d.
[27] Lazin 2003.
[28] Lazin 2003; Powell 1998d.
[29] Lazin 2003.
[30] Smith 1998a.
[31] Lazin 2003.
[32] Powell 1998d, 29.
[33] Lazin 2003.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Dyson 2001, 115.

[36] Lazin 2003.
[37] See Linebaugh 1992; 1993; Robinson 1993.
[38] Lazin 2003.
[39] See Powell 1998d; Smothers 1993; "Thug Life: Do the Children Play?" 1996. In 1991, two Oakland police officers arrested Shakur for jaywalking and the artist filed suit for brutality (it was eventually settled out of court). In 1992, while attending the very community festival in Marin City at which he used to perform as a young man, Shakur drew his gun during a confrontation, only to have it discharge and kill a six year-old boy playing in an adjacent schoolyard. That same year, the widow of a Texas police officer filed suit against Shakur, claiming the young black man who murdered her husband was inspired by the artist's lyrics. Shakur also encountered legal troubles with fellow celebrities. For example, in 1993, Shakur physically attacked film directors Allen and Albert Hughes after they dropped him from the cast of an upcoming film. Also in 1993, Shakur was arrested for shooting two off-duty police officers in Atlanta.
[40] See Harrington 1993a; Jones IV 1993a; Leland 1993; "Rap Star Tupac Shakur Arrested On Charges Of Shooting Two Cops" 1993; Smothers 1993.
[41] Lazin 2003.
[42] Harrington 1993a; Light 1998.
[43] Dyson 2001.
[44] See Chang 2005; Watkins 2005.
[45] Tim Dogg's invective came as a response to N.W.A.'s work, while Dre used "Nuthin' But a G Thang" as a vehicle to attack former 2 Live Crew member and producer Luther "Luke" Campbell. Campbell returned Dre's dis with his own "Cowards of Compton," released on his 1993 album *In the Nude*. Forman 2002.
[46] For example, a 1986 gang brawl at a Run DMC show in Long Beach resulted in forty injuries. Quinn 2005.
[47] Hinds 1996, 52.
[48] Coker 1998.
[49] See Samuels and Leland 1996; Powell 1998b.
[50] Forman 2002.
[51] Lewis 1996, 56; The Blackspot 1998; Forman 2002. This is not to suggest that East Coast artists abstained completely from the rivalry. For example, New York rap duo Mobb Deep released two diss tracks at the height of tensions, 1996's "Drop a Gem on 'Em" and "L.A., L.A." Also, at the 1995 filming of Tha Dogg Pound's "New York, New York" video, shots were fired at the West Coast artists' trailer in New York City.
[52] Johnson 1998.
[53] Lazin 2003.
[54] "Untitled" 1998, 59. Also see Lazin 2003.
[55] The Blackspot 1998; Lewis 1996.
[56] Lazin 2003.
[57] Powell 1998b.
[58] See "All Eyez on Him" 1998; Lazin 2003; Powell 1998a; 1998b.

[59] Jolson-Colburn 1996.
[60] Marriott 1998b, 126.
[61] As Forman notes, record companies became more cautious in signing and distributing rap acts. Prominent figures like Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, as well as hip-hop veterans like Chuck D of Public Enemy and Ice-T sought to heal the rift between the two camps. There was a palpable sense that nothing less than the soul of the hip-hop nation was at stake. See Forman 2002; Lewis 1996; Smith 1998c.
[62] See The Blackspot 1998.
[63] Dyson 2001.
[64] Forman 2002, 325.
[65] Quinn 2005, 183.
[66] See The Blackspot 1998.
[67] "Straight Spittin'" 2003, 112.
[68] Marriott 1998c.
[69] Steyn, 1996.
[70] Dearmond 1996.
[71] Simmons 1996.
[72] Pareles 1996.
[73] Constable 1996.
[74] Iverem 1996.
[75] Moppins 1996.
[76] Dawsey 1996.
[77] Ibid.
[78] "Harlem Mosque Sets Rap Peace Meeting" 1996.
[79] "Farrakhan to Sponsor D.C. Events" 1997.
[80] Cloud 1998b.
[81] Carroll 1996.
[82] Marriott 1998a, 131.
[83] Iverem 1997.
[84] Kinnon 1997.
[85] "Are Rappers Predicting Their Own Deaths?" 1997.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Leland 1997.
[88] Berman 1996.
[89] Samuels and Gates 1996.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Roberts 1996.
[92] "Tales of a Scary Knight" 1996.
[93] Samuels and Leland 1996. Emphasis added.
[94] Harrington 1996.
[95] See, for example, Samuels 1996.
[96] Marriott 1998a, 135.

[97] Löwy 2005, 116.
[98] See Quinn 2005.
[99] Powell 1998c, 51.
[100] Cited in Wenger and Bonomo 1993, 675-6. Also see Linebaugh 1992; 1993.
[101] Davis 2006; Padilla 1992; Venkatesh 2006.
[102] Powell 1998b, 77.
[103] Dyson argues that following his death, Shakur has "showed up more fully by disappearing." Dyson 2001, 255. A resurrection of sorts.

Conclusion: Rappers, Pirates, and the Politics of Criminality

Rap phenomenon Lil' Wayne led 2008 Grammy nominations with eight nods. His album, *The Carter III*, which had the highest grossing opening week of 2008, enlists many of the now-familiar tropes of gangsta rap.[1] Consider the following from the album's opening track:

> I might go crazy on these niggas /I don't give a motherfuck/Run up in a nigga house and shoot his grandmother up/What, what, I don't give a motherfuck/Get your baby kidnapped then your baby motherfucked/It's the Carter III bitch better put your supper up/Hollygrove I throw it up like I'm tryna lose my gut/'Fuck is up? Beat 'em up like a million uppercuts/Got a million duffled up for the fuck of it shit/Get on my level you can't get on my level/You will need a space shuttle or a ladder thus forever/However I'm better if not now then never/Don't you ever fix your lips unless you 'bout to suck my dick bitch/Swallow my words, taste my thoughts/And if it's too nasty, spit it back at me.

The articulation of brute, violent masculinity to assert artistic mastery in a genre where defending one's reputation and "dissing" industry rivals is familiar terrain saturates this introductory title and much of the album as a whole.[2] 50-Cent, another hugely successful contemporary rap artist, has so expanded the reach of his gangsta stylings that he has produced two first-person shooter videogames in which he and his so-called G-Unit crew partake in criminal escapades in pursuit of wealth and retribution.[3] Artists such as Sean Combs and Jay-Z have emerged from the coastal feud as iconic figures not only in hip-hop, but popular music and commodity culture in general.[4] As Tricia Rose writes in her recent book *The Hip Hop Wars*, "The trinity of commercial hip hop—the black gangsta, pimp, and ho—has been promoted and accepted to the point where it now dominates the genre's storytelling worldview."[5] In other words, gangsta has subsumed much of the hip-hop nation. It is impossible to imagine American popular culture without the profound influence and mainstreaming of gangsta rap.

This project has taken a relatively brief period in the history of American popular culture, the emergence of gangsta rap from 1988 to 1997, and situated it within a century-spanning confrontation between labor and capital known as the criminal justice system. The late 1980s and early 1990s constituted an era of crisis for America's inner cities. Amid widening income gaps, capital flight from urban areas, deep cuts in social programs, increased police supervision, and mass incarceration, black youth of this era became increasingly stigmatized and disenfranchised.[6] Such circumstances necessitated new regimes of discourse capable of articulating their shared relationships to social structures—or new fantasies.

While an earlier generation of African Americans structured religiously inflected fantasies of social struggle or utopian visions of a black nation, the youth of this era drew upon the very discursive resources that two decades of "tough on crime" politics had inscribed upon them. By partaking in resistant enactments of the regime of signifiers I have called the mark of criminality, gangsta rappers produced a rhetoric that was potentially emancipatory but simultaneously embedded within the commercial logic of the recording industry. Thus, from its inception, the gangsta genre was an always-ambivalent articulation of black criminality whose resulting fantasies harnessed the utopian hopes of a criminalized generation, as well as the generation before them, even as it packaged and sold the very moral panic that helped justify unprecedented levels of the incarceration of black bodies in America. While the genre always fell short of providing tangible resources for social change in its own right, it nonetheless employed rhetorical strategies that are relevant for broader struggles for social justice.

The foundational years of gangsta rap should be of interest to rhetorical scholars for a variety of reasons. In addition to engaging a seismic moment in American popular culture and addressing the ever-growing problem of mass incarceration, accounting for

the ways gangsta rappers functioned within the discursive terrain of racialized criminality and the strategies others used to discipline the genre illuminates the role of discursive struggle within material contexts. I have argued that discursive enactments of criminality, just as the practice of crime itself, functions dialectically with dominant fantasies of race and crime. While these resistant gestures are conditioned by hegemonic discourses of moral panic, resistance also plays a role in the creation of meaning. Such an observation suggests that resistance, itself, is something more than an enfoldment of dominant discourses, but a participant in the creation of meaning.[7] Even as dominant fantasies may prevail within a given historical moment, conditioning and subordinating the resistant efforts of the marginalized and oppressed, the very fact of that dominant fantasy betrays a need on the part of those in positions of power to reckon with the utopian desires and emancipatory designs of an exploited and oppressed people.[8]

In order to outline the broader implications of this analysis of resistance in gangsta rap, I first articulate the trajectory of gangsta rap as cultural production and political practice. Next, I address the research questions I articulated when I opened this project: To what extent does gangsta rap enable and disable rhetorical and political agency? To what extent does it enable and disable interracial political practice? What are the implications of gangsta rap for a gendered politics of criminality? Finally, I address the broader implications of a resistant politics of criminality, addressing two remaining questions: In what ways does the criminal justice system operate as a site of rhetorical invention and hegemonic struggle? How do subjects use rhetoric to articulate their relationships to social structures and how do those structures enable and constrain subjectivity?

MAPPING GANGSTA RAP

Thirteen years have passed since the violent death of Tupac Shakur in Las Vegas. What, in this time, is the political legacy of gangsta rap and its role in the articulation of black criminality? In the accompanying "map" of gangsta rap (Figure 1), I diagram the

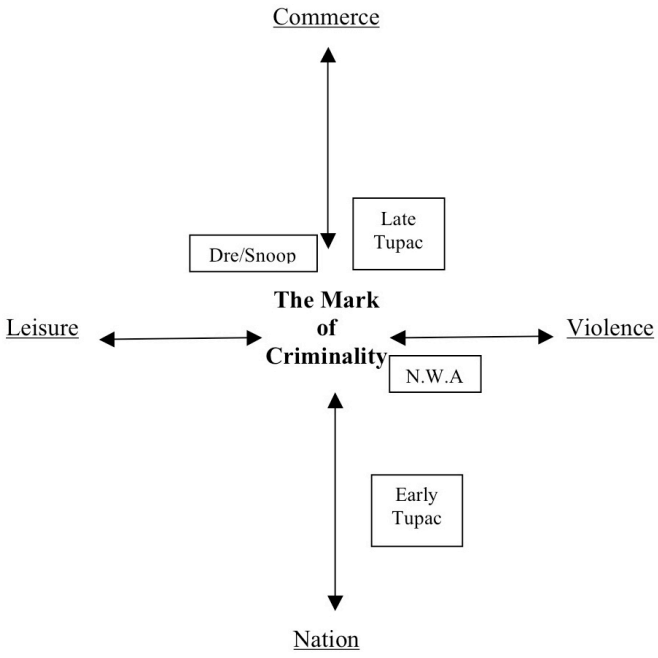

Figure 1: Mapping gangsta rap.

key political trajectories of the genre discussed in this project. Maps, of course, do violence to their subject matter and are always-imperfect rhetorical representations thereof.[9] Nonetheless, by visually mapping the trajectories of gangsta rap, I imagine a heuristic mechanism for understanding the legacy of this important musical genre. I locate the various gangsta artists discussed in this project along two key axes: commerce/nation and leisure/violence. *Commerce* refers to explicitly profit-driven

imperatives, whereas *nation* denotes those discourses more explicitly invested in constituted a collective urban subject. Fantasies of *leisure*, as I have previously noted, entail dance, consumption, and sexual practices articulated through the mark of criminality. The *violence* of gangsta rap, of course, might be enlisted toward a variety of targets, including those in positions of institutional power or other members of the hip-hop nation. Both axes emanate from and toward the broader discursive terrain of the mark of criminality, highlighting my position that gangsta represents a resistant enactment of the regime of signifiers associated with race and criminality in the United States. Commerce, nation, leisure, and violence are all, therefore, conditioned by and articulated through broader fantasies of racialized criminality. All arrows in the diagram are bidirectional in order to demonstrate how none of these variables are entirely distinct from one another. All are dialectically related, as they are also so related to the mark of criminality.

The resulting diagram portrays four key quadrants associated with gangsta rap. The first is leisure and commerce. The artists who primarily function in this quadrant deployed rhetorics of leisure within a broader discourse of commercial success. As I note, Dr. Dre and Snoop Doggy Dogg fit most firmly at this intersection. While their work enacted the practices of a criminalized generation of black youth following the Los Angeles uprising, it did so in a way that unambiguously prioritized the profit-driven aspirations of the artists and their record company, Death Row Records. While I have argued that both fantasies of leisure and capital accumulation within the so-called G-funk era contain elements of resistance, this era of gangsta rap ultimately fell prey to a cultural economy of degradation that marketed misogyny, violence, and consumption to young listeners. Dre and Snoop Dogg proved to be Pied Pipers who led their flock astray.

The second quadrant, commerce and violence, most closely aligns with the late work of Tupac Shakur during his contract with Death Row Records. Shakur's post-incarceration recordings employed the same indignation of his earlier "Thug Life" work, but without the explicit investment in structural critique. Instead, Shakur's brief Death Row days were driven by his vitriolic investment in the East Coast-West Coast feud. Thus, anger that might otherwise have been reserved for law enforcement and other expressions of institutional power were directed toward the artists and executives of Bad Boy Entertainment.

Other artists in the gangsta narrative also deployed violent rhetorics within a fantasy of commerce. Dre and Snoop Dogg both posited themselves as men capable of unleashing violent force against those who paid them any disrespect. Theirs was a violence rooted in a fantasy of virtuosity and hypermasculinity. Of course, the misogyny at play in the work of all the artists discussed in this project occupies an ambiguous space between leisure and violence, highlighting that no clear dichotomy exists between these two discourses. Whereas many of the leisurely fantasies of N.W.A., Dre, Snoop Dogg, and Shakur dealt with sexuality, their portrayal of women was always tainted with a crass objectification and degradation—both of which are certainly violent.

The quadrant of violence and nationalism, in many regards, represents the most politically explicit expressions of gangsta rap. The early work of Tupac Shakur provided the most forthrightly nationalistic—and potentially messianic—discourses of racialized criminality. Black Nationalism is itself a political tradition fraught with contradictions and limitations. However, compared to his later discourses of violent retribution, Shakur's enlistment of violent fantasies within the politically infused thematic of "Thug Life" was far more faithful to the structures of racism and exploitation that led to the

mass incarceration of young African American youth during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

As I noted in Chapter Three, N.W.A.'s nationalist fantasy of spatial fidelity associated with Compton also used violent discourses to differentiate those with legitimate claims to the urban nation constituted within South Central Los Angeles from the modern-day colonizers at the Los Angeles Police Department. Indeed, as the profound controversy surrounding "F--- Tha Police" and other rap tracks targeting law enforcement for violent retribution suggests, the struggle for autonomy and the prerogative of violence was deadly serious business with profound implications for all those invested in constituting fantasies of race and criminality at the end of the 20th Century.

Finally, the intersection of leisure and nation stands as the only empty quadrant on this diagram. This does not suggest a complete absence of artists operating at this nexus—all the artists stand in relative proximity to it—but indicates that no gangsta artist discussed in this project staked their rhetorical practice *primarily* on a nationalist fantasy of leisure. However, as I document in Chapter Four, the G-funk era was founded, in part, on the leisurely practices of a reconstituted young black (male) subjectivity following the Los Angeles uprising. Whereas gang divisions in inner cities across the United States had taken a devastating toll on poor and working class minorities occupying these urban sectors, a series of gang truces offered the promise of reconciliation and community among these previously warring factions.[10] Among the most commonly policed expressions of this promise were black leisure practices, such as outdoor gatherings between previously warring gang members. Both Dre and Snoop Dogg lyrically, sonically, and visually deployed fantasies of these leisure practices, positing the party as the primary site of their virtuosity in the West Coast rap industry. Similarly, in his 1996

homage to the West Coast, "California Love," Shakur, along with Dr. Dre, celebrated the vast recreational landscape of the Golden State ("We in that sunshine state where the bomb-ass hemp be/The state where ya never find a dance floor empty"). Operating at the intersection of leisure and nation, gangsta artists valorized criminalized locales through the practices of dance, sex, and consumption. Because they advance a collective subjectivity associated with leisure, such discourses function as understated and degraded nationalist discourses.

Of course, a genre as complex and controversial as gangsta rap cannot be reduced to clean dichotomies between commerce and nation, or violence and leisure. For example, a key ideological theme in Black *Nationalism* is the support of African American *commerce*.[11] Furthermore, what are the misogynistic leisurely discourses of gangsta rap if not violent? And while I identify Dr. Dre as primarily rooted in the quadrant of leisure and commerce, his 1992 track "The Day the Niggaz Took Over" functions as a forceful expression of black rage following the Los Angeles uprising ("Ya see when niggaz get together/They get mad cause they can't fade us/Like my niggaz from South Central, Los Angeles/They found that they couldn't handle us/Bloods, Crips on the same squad") that would certainly fit more neatly at the intersection of violence and nation. Thus, the above diagram should function as a framework for imagining a geography of gangsta without presuming that any such cartography shall serve as a final word. In order to further articulate the politics and geography of gangsta rap, I now turn to the research questions that have guided this project.

REVOLUTIONARY BUT/AND/OR GANGSTA: CRIME AND POLITICAL AGENCY

While I have demonstrated how artists such as N.W.A., Dr. Dre, Snoop Doggy Dogg, and Tupac Shakur have operated within and enacted fantasies of racialized

criminality, such rhetorical work does not necessarily amount to concrete political practice. In fact, the preceding case studies suggest bleak prospects for the genre, given its investment in commercial aspirations, misogynistic fantasies, and the sensationalistic discourses of violence. However, this project hinges on the belief that the most ambivalent, even noxious text contains a muted expression of righteous indignation that can be channeled toward more emancipatory political practice. Thus, below, I consider two modes of gangsta, those that remain embedded within the logic of commerce and those whose nationalist politics contain progressive political potential.

Since gangsta rap's heyday, the corporate dimension of the hip-hop nation has become its defining element. As Christopher Holmes Smith argues, the *hip-hop mogul* is the iconic center of rap music.[12] Making precisely this observation, Quinn laments,

> Yet, spearheaded by these new star producer-rappers, especially after the deaths of Tupac and Biggie, the balance in mainstream rap shifted further away from the ghetto scenarios toward major-league consumerist success… If West Coast gangstas gave expressive shape to the work and income crises of young men, hip-hop moguls of the late 1990s and after spoke more to the concomitant rise in consumerist identities.[13]

While I do not believe gangsta's ambitions were ever entirely directed toward the critique of the prison-industrial complex, or the improvement of impoverished black communities, its earlier manifestations nonetheless invited a critical encounter with the politics of race and crime in America. Since the deaths of Shakur and Biggie, however, the market-driven logic of gangsta has secured hegemony in the hip-hop nation. The articulation of gangsta discourses in contemporary rap music (e.g. Lil' Wayne, 50 Cent, Jay-Z), while not without their poignancies, are enfolded within a market driven logic that is rarely a threat to the political, social, or racial order.[14] The hip-hop mogul is, by and large, a mogul like any other, even as poor and working class members of the African

American community remain incarcerated, underpaid, and unemployed in disproportionate numbers.[15]

Holmes argues that the best political outcome of the rise of the hip-hop mogul would be "pedagogical imperatives" designed to familiarize young blacks with market investment in hopes that they might recognize "that the pursuit of wealth, and the symbolic elements of the 'good life' that wealth enables, are part of the very fabric of freedom in modern capitalist democracies."[16] However, as our own trying economic times illustrate, the promises of "capitalist democracies" are disastrously contingent and often untenable for those populations most often relegated to a "reserve army of labor" and targeted for mass incarceration.[17] While I remain convinced, as I argued in Chapter Five, that capital accumulation performed by black cultural producers is in some regards a resistant act, it also highlights the limitations of a politics located upon the axis of commerce. Figures such as Combs, Knight, "dirty South" mogul Percy "Master P" Miller, as well as hip-hop pioneer Russell Simmons, while engaged in many important political and charitable projects (some of which target the prison-industrial complex), are unlikely to hasten a fundamental challenge to the politics of race and criminality that sustain broader structures of exploitation intrinsic to the market economy.[18]

While the mogul-centered and profit-driven ethos of today's rap industry is its most prevalent component, there remain artists that demonstrate hip-hop's more radical possibilities. Artists and groups like Common, The Coup, The Roots, Audible Mainframe, Mos Def, Immortal Technique, and Talib Kweli have "sustained and revised traditions of black protest culture" and "derive energy and definition from their opposition to the dominant gangsta ethic."[19] However, there is one so-called "conscious" rap group that derives much of its political content from the criminal discourses of gangsta rap. Functioning within the quadrant of nation and violence, the Florida-based

duet dead prez exemplifies nothing less than an explicitly nationalist politics of criminality that highlights, I believe, much of gangsta's political promise and legacy. Of particular interest for this project is dead prez's 2004 album *Revolutionary But Gangsta*, or *RBG*. The acronym "RBG" corresponds with the colors of the Black Nationalist flag—red, black, and green—even as it articulates a radical political program through the criminality implicit in the signifier "gangsta." In other words, while they proclaim fidelity to the legacies of Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and the Black Panther Party, dead prez simultaneously enlists the discourses of its gangsta forbearers.

Consider the lyrics of their popular single "Hell Yeah (Pimp the System)." After lamenting the destitution of the ghetto ("Sittin' in the living room on the floor/All the pain got me on some migraine shit/But I'm gonna maintain/Nigga got 2 or 3 dollars to my name/And my homies in the same boat going through the same thing"), MC M-1 raps over a rapid-fire drum machine beat:

> Lemme tell you how we fend to get paid/We gonna order pizza and when we see the driver/We gonna stick the 25 up in his face/Lets ride, stepping outside like warriors/Head to the notorious Southside/One weapon to the four of us/Hiding in the corridor until we see the Dominos car headlights/White boy in the wrong place at the right time/Soon as the car door open up he be mine/We roll up quick and put the pistol to his nose/By the look on his face he probably shitted in his clothes.

The remainder of the track relates similar narratives of credit card and welfare fraud, as well as workplace theft. The song closes with the ultimatum, "If you coming gangsta/Then bring on the system/And show that you ready to ride/Till we get our freedom/We got to get over/Please steady on the grind." Crime—both violent and nonviolent—becomes a mode of income redistribution in light of dead prez's critique of white supremacy and capitalism. What might, in mainstream contexts, appear a defenseless and innocent pizza delivery driver becomes, in the gangsta fantasy of dead

prez, an appendage of a fundamentally broken system. Tracks such as "Walk Like a Warrior," "For the Hood," "50 in the Clip," and "Down" similarly espouse a revolutionary project whose battlefields are the urban streets and whose weapon is the gangsta's assault rifle. The revolutionary but gangsta subject, for dead prez, is a criminalized urban warrior.

There is, of course, a good deal to say about dead prez's criminal/nationalist project. Chief among these is a critique that implicates many nationalist fantasies.[20] While dead prez's reconfiguration of dominant fantasies of culpability and victimhood within a discourse of criminality offers potentials for critical intervention, precisely *how* they imagine such configurations is problematic. The lone pizza delivery driver, or "White boy in the wrong place at the right time" emerges in this narrative as somehow complicit within the workings of capital that have enabled the poverty and mass incarceration dead prez seeks to address. However, I am inclined to agree with music critic David Drake:

> In "Hell Yeah", the artists describe a situation in which they rob a white pizza delivery boy for his cash at gunpoint. It's obviously done for shock value—to display the implications of hunger and poverty and the situations that such circumstances can provoke—but at the same time it contradicts much of the "fight the power" politics that Dead Prez claims to support. The pizza delivery boy is not a part of the system; he is a member of the oppressed underclass, a potential ally that becomes a victim. Because of this hypocrisy, the members of Dead Prez become victims of their own politics.[21]

While we should, as Drake suggests, be mindful of dead prez's place in the black vernacular tradition and recognize the place of irony within their work, the implications of such rhetoric for their broader political project is nonetheless problematic.[22] In an interview with *VIBE* shortly following the release of *RBG*, the magazine asked dead prez DJ stic.man to comment on the place of white fans in the struggle. He explained,

> As far as white people's place in the struggle right now—reparations. Motherf***ing (Justin) Timberlake and goddamn Eminem. You know,

> motherf***ers walking aroud [*sic*] faking shit. If you white, and you want to get down with our struggle, get along and all that extra sh*t, then give us our reparations. Or we gonna come get that reparations. We gonna come get that cell phone, that blue PathFinder.[23]

stic.man's polemical answer situates white fans on the margins of anti-racist struggle—or at least in a fundamentally different sphere. Located outside the RBG nation proper, the white subject is responsible for atoning for the sins of her or his racist ancestry, rather than engaging in genuine interracial political practice. While a critique of dead prez's posture toward white fans should not entail reactionary discourses lamenting "reverse racism," it is nonetheless vital for a sustainable politics capable of challenging the prison-industrial complex to encounter race and racism as expressions of a broader regime of exploitation and oppression of which mass incarceration is but one expression.[24] To be sure, racialized subjects will experience the mark of criminality in a way that requires distinct modes of resistance, but a politics founded on nationalist fantasies risks falling prey to its own internal contradictions that will, in turn, undermine attempts to forge alliances across struggles and races capable of challenging structures above and beyond the prison system. Only by imagining race as an expression of a vast exploitative apparatus that implicates all laboring subjects can activists envision a politics that simultaneously recognizes distinct subjectivities and is driven by an interracial *telos*.[25]

Rose cautions that a rigid dichotomization between commercial and political hip-hop "significantly disadvantages establishing a progressive vision as the basis for a wide variety of hip hop styles, approaches, and levels of explicitly political content."[26] While it is certainly important to engage, even support, those rappers who deploy the tropes of gangsta toward emancipatory goals or abandon them altogether in the service of a more forthrightly progressive project, it should not necessitate abandoning the far more popular work of mainstream artists. Much of my analysis in this project has argued forcefully

against dismissing the work of artists like N.W.A. or Snoop Dogg as mere crass commercialism. Rather, critics and activists should be invested in observing within the axes of commerce and nation, or leisure and violence the same scathing critiques of capital, racism, and mass incarceration that are more explicit in the works of dead prez and their "conscious" comrades. I agree with Rose that "[journalists], bloggers, activists, teachers, students, filmmakers, social workers, and novelists" all have a role to play in generating "literacy about hip hop, black culture, the power of progressive cross-cultural exchange, and social justice."[27] For as important as producing cultural texts that are powerful and unambiguous in their progressive aims is learning to extrapolate and centralize the political possibilities inherent within more ambivalent works of rap. This is particularly crucial given the considerably greater degree of popularity and reach enjoyed by the latter.[28]

Ultimately, neither commercial nor nationalist expressions of gangsta will enable sustainable political practice in their own rights. Whether situated in the domain of leisure or violence, both articulations of a black cultural politics *vis-à-vis* gangsta rap, left to their own devices, amount to sensationalistic discourses that partake in reifications of violence, misogyny, and consumption. As with all forms of popular culture, the fantasies of gangsta rap are useful to the extent that they inform and seek inspiration from grassroots struggle. Icons such as Billie Holiday, Bob Marley, and the many artists who helped bring an end to South Africa's apartheid regime were themselves deeply invested in struggles beyond the recording studio.[29] Thus, for movements committed to challenging the prison-industrial complex in the United States, efforts to merge the discourses of gangsta and social movements may help enhance participation and analysis for these struggles.

Several anecdotes highlight how struggles against the prison-industrial complex have drawn from the rhetorical legacy of gangsta rap. For example, several members of the hip-hop nation—including dead prez—called protests surrounding the prosecution of the so-called "Jena 6" in Jena, Louisiana. After a group of African American students sat underneath the high school's "white tree" during lunchtime, some white students responded by hanging small nooses on it. The resulting racial tensions reached their climax during an in-school fistfight that left a white student with a mild concussion. Five of the six black students arrested following incident were tried as adults for the white student's attempted murder.

In response to the perceived racial bias in the case (i.e. young black men charged with attempted murder even as white students involved in violence following the noose incident received comparably lighter punishments), approximately 20,000 protestors marched through Jena. Members of the hip-hop nation including dead prez, Ice Cube, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, and T.I. lent logistical and financial support to the grassroots movement surrounding the case. In addition to the deep historical resonance of nooses hanging from trees in the former Jim Crow South, I believe the questions of race, violence, and criminality posed by the Jena 6 case corresponded with the cultural legacy of gangsta within the history of hip-hop. The emergence of gangsta rap in the late 1980s prompted hip-hop and the nation at large to confront longstanding fantasies of racialized criminality and entertain alternative renderings thereof. Hip-hop, thus, stood as a cultural community particularly suited to intervene in an incident that itself reflected the mark of criminality's role in shaping the lives of young African Americans.[30]

Gangsta rap also provides a vocabulary for registering political outrage. Consider the following from an account of a shrine to the victim of a police shooting in Oakland:

> Scrawled across the [makeshift memorial] is the accusation: "The Police did this," and "Fuck 5-0." Another mourner, using a phrase popularized by hip-hop group dead prez, claims to be "revolutionary but gangsta." Perhaps more ominously, one message reads: "The streets iz watching justice will be served 4 my brother in arms." A middle-aged man arrives, clearly angry, and begins to address some onlookers. "A boy was murdered here! Why ain't this intersection closed? We need to shut this intersection down for a week!"[31]

If these epitaphs are any indication, gangsta functions as a resource for expressing collective disdain toward a criminal justice apparatus responsible for incarcerating, maiming, even exterminating black bodies in disproportionate numbers. How such anger is channeled is of course, contingent upon the efforts of those community organizers who continue the hard, even messianic work of campaigning after the famous rap artists have moved onto another cause or record. However, the profit-driven imperatives of N.W.A., Death Row Records, and others, while not necessarily connected to movements in their own right, can nonetheless be appropriated by those who wish to express their indignation, as well as those organizers who hope to channel such anger toward the kind of political practice capable of achieving concrete changes in public policy.

"SO, I HEAR YOU'RE GANGSTER!": WHITE CONSUMERS OF BLACK CRIMINALITY

A popular t-shirt and poster available at a variety of novelty stores across the country portrays a white man wearing a business suit and smile, flashing the iconic "West Side" hand signal. Surrounding him is the caption, "So, I noticed that you're gangster… I'm pretty gangster myself."[32] This graphic of a man partaking in a vernacular tradition that clearly is not his own parodies a longstanding anxiety associated with gangsta rap and the hip-hop nation as a whole: white consumption.

As Watkins documents, the success of early gangsta rap groups, particularly N.W.A., among young white audiences made this demographic the *primary* commercial target audience for the genre. This prompted a wide range of debate about *why* whites

would be so attracted to a genre that, in many ways, embodied white America's fears of criminalized blacks. While some suggest that white rap consumption was merely an expression of youth rebellion or a sign of improving race relations, others believe it is an articulation of white racism.[33] William Yousmann argues that the white consumption of rap music constitutes a performance that "allows Whites to contain their fears and animosities toward Blacks through rituals…of adoration."[34] He posits that such performances are enactments of white supremacy. Kheven LaGrone situates gangsta rap within the tradition of minstrelsy, writing that the genre, like its predecessor, "sold white America…its worse racial nightmares."[35] Such concerns, of course, are connected to a wider critique of the white consumption of black cultural artifacts, a phenomenon critics like E. Patrick Johnson and bell hooks have argued reifies dominant racial structures.[36]

While I agree with such critiques, I also believe white consumption of gangsta creates the condition of possibility for interracial solidarity through its weaving of criminal fantasies. I agree with George Lipsitz's argument that popular music can serve "as an important weapon in battles…to transform alliances and identities within already existing states, and to unmask the power imbalances that give regions, languages, and ethnic groups very different relations to the state they supposedly all share."[37] Lipsitz notes several artists from disadvantaged ethnic communities who, by virtue of music's fluidity across and within national boundaries, have been able to forge ties with those outside their immediate cultural and material space. Popular music, he claims, "sometimes offers subordinate populations opportunities to escape the limits of their own societies."[38]

The white consumption of gangsta's violent and hyperbolic fantasies, I believe, highlights the capacity of criminal discourses to enable resistance across subjectivities. While I do not doubt the deadly serious consequences associated with the appropriation

of racial discourses or presume that all white consumption of rap is righteous and political, I do believe that the affective enjoyment white audiences derive from gangsta rap awakens a resistant impulse associated with one's location within repressive social structures. Indeed, I am inclined to agree with Eric Lott's contention that the white appropriation of blackness is fraught with complexity, functioning as a "Janus-faced figure for the cultural relationship of white to black America, a relationship that even in its dominative character was far from self-explanatory."[39]

While white consumption of gangsta might not be channeled in concrete political directions, the performance of racialized criminality through the consumption of gangsta may nonetheless represent the muted yearnings of a populace and the condition of possibility for interracial political practice. One modest, but nonetheless instructive example of gangsta functioning as a site of resistance for white subjects is the 1999 comedy film *Office Space*. The film portrays three employees (two white, one Middle Eastern) of a software company. Disillusioned with the drudgery of cubicle life and looming corporate restructuring, the three develop a plan to electronically rob their employer of several million dollars. Gangsta rap figures heavily in the film's soundtrack, featuring artists like Ice Cube, Geto Boys, and Scarface. One iconic scene from the film portrays the three men destroying the office fax machine with baseball bats as the Geto Boys' track "Damn It Feels Good to Be a Gangsta" plays.[40] The film, which displays class-based expressions of resistance articulated, in part, through the fantasies of gangsta, has become a cult classic since its release. While many elements contribute to this film's resonance with "those of us who grew up watching MTV in the eighties and then graduated to soul-sucking corporate jobs in the nineties," I believe its use of gangsta rap heightens its resonance with those seeking fantasies of resistance against the drudgery of capital. [41] The choice to include these songs, itself, suggests a belief on the part of the

film's creators that gangsta aided in satirizing the banality of cubicle culture. Indeed, much of the gangsta rap story was told by and through MTV, and the genre unavoidably played a role in the subjectivity of *all* music consumers at the end of the 20th Century.

While it is impossible to deny the many limitations associated with white commodification, consumption and enactment of black criminality, as well as the limitations of a nationalist politics that posits whites as always and already suspect, I believe the enjoyment of gangsta rap by white audiences also reveals a resonance with political potential. As Jameson's work on cognitive mapping argues, subjects occupy myriad locations within the totality of social structures. While gangsta certainly provides racialized subjects the opportunity to imagine resistant postures toward the criminal justice system, it may also enable white consumers to re-imagine their own relationships to whiteness, crime, and work. Thus, while scholars and activists should not dismiss the despicable legacy of minstrelsy implicit in the relationship between white audiences and gangsta rap, it is equally unwise to ignore the resistant possibilities therein. Of course, the gangsta discourses discussed thus far, ranging from the violent nationalism of dead prez to the workplace resistance of *Office Space* are articulated through the experiences of males. Accordingly, I now turn to the politics of gender and criminality.

THE GENDERED POLITICS OF RACE AND CRIME

This project, in addition to engaging the politics of race and crime *vis-à-vis* gangsta rap in the late 1980s and early 1990s, has also been a study of black masculinity. Black masculinity is a criminalized construct that is enfolded within hegemonic fantasies of moral panic associated with black subjectivity in America.[42] I have demonstrated how gangsta rap artists were conditioned by criminalized renderings of black masculinity while simultaneously enacting those very representations. In addition to asserting black

masculinity through fantasies of violence, gangsta discourse is laden with sexual, often misogynistic imagery that reifies hegemonic fantasies of black masculinity even as it deploys them in a resistant fashion. While gangsta's objectification of females typically operates within a fantasy structure of leisure, such discourses also perform profound rhetorical violence upon the female body. I have agreed with Tricia Rose's contention that it is not enough to recognize the obvious limitations associated with a resistant discourse so laden with degrading language and imagery. Rather, one must simultaneously be critical of mainstream figures whose attacks against gangsta's gendered discourses are far more invested in maintaining hegemonic regimes of racial and gender politics than in the interests of black women.[43]

But beyond engaging in critiques of gangsta's obvious limitations where gender is concerned, a larger question about the nature of criminality emerges. What is the nature of *feminine* criminality? Is there a place for such a discourse in gangsta rap? Stabile argues that the feminine is a status typically assigned to *victims* in the narrative of race and crime, or those who must be protected from hypermasculine, often racialized predators.[44] Most popular treatments of feminine villains portray them as transgressive, violating the norms of femininity, often as lesbians or *Medea* figures (i.e. bad mothers).[45] In other instances, women who act violently are characterized as vulnerable figures lashing out in response to threats.[46] Meda Chesney-Lind demonstrates how surges in female criminalization and incarceration historically correspond with wider moral panics surrounding struggles for women's liberation.[47] This is similar to the proliferation of fantasies of racialized criminality at the close of the 1960s, which are widely understood as attempts to curtail the gains of the Civil Rights Era.[48] Just as the disciplining of black male bodies by the criminal justice system has always been connected to a broader regime of social control, so too has the imprisonment of women—proportionately, the

nation's fastest growing incarcerated population—functioned to sustain dominant regimes of gender performativity.[49]

The relationship between gender and criminality becomes further complicated within the domain of race relations. For example, De Coster and Heimer argue that while poor and working class black women, like their white female counterparts, are less likely to see violence as a viable way of asserting their gendered identity than men, they are *more likely* to use violence as a means of self-protection than white women. The authors argue this is largely due to the inability of similarly situated African American *men* to provide income, partnership, and stability, rendering these women's conditions for survival all the more precarious.[50] Thus, black female criminality is largely conditioned by the criminalized discourses inscribed upon black male subjects, given the economic disenfranchisement associated with mass incarceration.[51] Furthermore, as with incarcerated women of all races, black women who encounter the criminal justice system as *both* victims and culprits have suffered emotional and physical abuse from male partners.[52]

However, African American women are themselves inscribed with the signifiers of criminality, even as it differs from those associated with black men. Kristen Clarke demonstrates how black women are assumed to "have a greater propensity for crime on the basis of their racial status."[53] Furthermore, African American women, particularly during the 1980s and early 1990s, are criminalized *vis-à-vis* their relationship to motherhood. In her rigorous analysis of the criminalization of black women, Julia Jordan-Zacherys explains how hysteria surrounding the war on drugs generated discourses associated with black motherhood that constructed the prototypical female drug addict as "young, poor, black, urban, on welfare, the mother of many children, and addicted to crack."[54] The result was a proliferating discourse of bad-motherhood and addiction that,

along with long-standing stereotypes associated with black womanhood (i.e. the mammy, Jezebel, matriarch) made poor black women a target for prosecution. Thus, consistent with the central insights of black feminist thought, African American women experience a criminalization that is both racialized and gendered.[55]

While the role of females in the gangsta genre is far less visible than that of their male counterparts, Quinn notes, "Female gangsta artists, as self-consciously as their male peers, took on the cartoonish roles of materialist hoes."[56] Others, she writes, deployed discourses of violence as a mode of revenge against male artists' misogynistic tendencies, demonstrating "a deep and, at times, vengeful mistrust of men and of patriarchal authorities."[57] Artists like Yo-Yo and Lil' Kim, Boss, and Hoes With Attitude (H.W.A.) were contemporaries of the male artists I have discussed in this project who deployed rhetorics of criminalized female sexuality. While such discourse poses a number of problems for progressive feminist politics of criminality, they also enable, like *and* along with their male contemporaries, an opportunity to engage in critical rational discourse and resistant political practice regarding race, gender and crime. Writes Quinn,

> If [the badman tales of gangsta rap] recount comic tales of female abuse, they also involve vulnerable, edgy expressions of insecurity, frustration, and loss; and if gangsta's pimping tales return repeatedly to the exploitation of women, they also explore the power of female sexuality, and expose the hidden materialist underpinnings of sexual transactions in contemporary society.[58]

In other words, gangsta's gendered discourses emerge, in part, from male and female artists dialogically reckoning with the fraught parameters of race, gender, and crime, even as they are complicit in commodifying those very discourses. Furthermore, female artists like Lauryn Hill and Sarah Jones pose powerful challenges to the violent and misogynistic "trinity" described by Rose.[59] However, like Rose, we should avoid dichotomizing the politically "pure" expressions of female sexuality and criminality from

the more problematic ones, but instead seek dialogue and critical engagement across the hip-hop nation and other terrains of struggle. Kyra Pearson writes, "Examining public discussions of female criminality contributes to our understanding of 'gender trouble' and the reiteration of gender norms."[60] By critically intervening in discourses of gendered criminality—whether in popular culture, high profile criminal cases, or elsewhere—scholars and activists can *kairotically* articulate such fantasies to a broader context of struggle.

IMAGINING A POLITICS OF CRIMINALITY

> Yes, as through this world I've wandered/I've seen lots of funny men;/Some will rob you with a six-gun,/And some with a fountain pen.
>
> And as through your life you travel,/Yes, as through your life you roam,/You won't never see an outlaw/Drive a family from their home.
>
> - Woody Guthrie, "Pretty Boy Floyd"

Iconic folk singer Woody Guthrie wrote his homage to the legendary bank robber Pretty Boy Floyd in the late 1930s in the throes of the Great Depression. As activist and journalist Alexander Billet commented in a recent article about Guthrie's song,

> The joblessness and mass evictions ushered in by the Great Depression were accompanied by an uptick in outlaw gangs barnstorming the country, knocking over banks as they went. And though the presses did their best to villify [*sic*] him, Guthrie's perception of Floyd was that of a folk hero, someone who stuck it to the fat-cats and righted more than a few wrongs along the way.[61]

Billet highlights how the Depression's devastation turned traditional fantasies of ownership and transgression on their heads. The bank robber became a folk hero and the banker the villain, even as mainstream rhetors sought to discipline such discourses within hegemonic notions of criminality. It was, as Negt and Kluge would argue, a moment when fantasies turned around and faced reality.[62]

Just as Guthrie reframed the criminal practices of Pretty Boy Floyd during a time of profound social upheaval, so too did the artists of gangsta rap invite a reconsideration of prevailing fantasies of race and crime in the United States. While the 1980s and early 1990s did not produce the bread lines and tent cities of the Great Depression, Reagan-era neoliberal reforms, coupled with a sustained "war on crime" fought well into the Clinton administration, devastated many poor and working class African American communities in America's inner-cities.[63] It constituted a profound moment of rupture that required alternative fantasies. Drawing from already-existing discourses of race and crime—the regime of signifiers I identify as the mark of criminality—these rappers deployed an affirmative and profit-driven fantasy of racialized criminality.

The pronounced responses to gangsta rap from law enforcement, veterans of the Civil Rights era, and mainstream media highlight the saliency of such criminalized rhetoric. Indeed, the criminal justice system and its accompanying fantasies of moral panic associated with transgression have long functioned as mechanisms of social control, not only in the United States, but across the antagonistic parameters of human civilization.[64] Incarceration and criminality function within broader regimes of exploitation and oppression that serve specific interests while undermining others'. Thus, gangsta's ability to successfully deploy alternative fantasies of criminality posed a profound threat to hegemonic notions of race, sexuality, and morality that required responses intent on the genre's subordination.

The structures of the recording industry, as well as broader systems of commerce and meaning, prevented gangsta from emerging as a genuinely progressive cultural force. On its own, gangsta rap is not a tool for the kinds of political resistance capable of forging powerful alliances and challenging social structures. Rather, it represents an enactment of criminality that, while problematic, nonetheless reveals the rhetorical role

of criminality in encouraging dialogue, critique, and, in some cases, political practice. As I close, I turn to a more recent enactment of criminality off the shores of the impoverished African nation of Somalia in order to address the broader implications of hegemonic struggle waged upon the surface of the criminal justice system.

Early in April 2009, a small group of Somali "pirates" hijacked a U.S.-operated container ship with an all-American crew in the Indian Ocean off the Somali coast. This seizure was one of 66 to take place in the past year, but the first in over 100 years involving a U.S. crew. *The Washington Post* described the pirates as "a collection of shrewd businessmen and daring opportunists who have pulled off a series of spectacular seizures using high- and low-tech gear, from satellite phones and rocket-propelled grenades to battered wooden skiffs and rickety ladders."[65] Following a successful U.S. military mission to rescue the ship's captain, military officials have indicated that they are considering military attacks on pirate bases within the Somali border.[66] Furthermore, the supposed "ringleader" of the seizure, a Somali teenager named Abduwali Abdukhadir Muse, now faces federal charges and life imprisonment.[67]

Much of the institutional and mainstream responses to the seizure and subsequent rescue framed the situation as one of U.S.-led heroism against internationally unaccountable thugs.[68] The saga even inspired a cable television show.[69] However, not all deployments of this affair engaged in hegemonic fantasies of American valor poised against the racialized criminal elements of an unruly developing world. For example, in an illuminating article, journalist Johann Hari noted how Somali piracy is the direct consequence of European nuclear waste disposal and illegal fishing off the destabilized nation's coast following its government's collapse in 1991. Writes Hari,

> No, this doesn't make hostage-taking justifiable, and yes, some are clearly just gangsters—especially those who have held up World Food Programme supplies.

> But in a telephone interview, one of the pirate leaders, Sugule Ali: "We don't consider ourselves sea bandits. We consider sea bandits [to be] those who illegally fish and dump in our seas."[70]

One of the few Somali voices amid the cacophony of commentary in the wake of the pirate "crisis" was Canadian-Somali hip-hop artist K'Naan. In an article entitled "Why We don't Condemn Our Pirates in Somalia," he writes,

> No one can say for sure that some of the ships they are now holding for ransom were not involved in illegal activity in our waters. The truth is, if you ask any Somali if they think getting rid of the pirates only means the continuous rape of our coast by unmonitored Western vessels, and the production of a new cancerous generation, we would all fly our pirate flags high.[71]

The lesson of the Somali pirates is how, amid the conflicting interests of capital and the crises of empire, hegemonic understandings of property, state, and crime become contingent within a fraught terrain of struggle. Whereas popular renderings of these maritime encounters sustain the logic of international trade and American hegemony during the War on Terror, the tales of these young African men find resonance with their fellow citizens and, potentially, others whose relationships to capital are precarious and sometimes brutal. As the United States encounters a rupture in the free market fantasies of neoliberalism, one wonders how fantasies of criminality may crumble in the face of changing material conditions and how resistant fantasies of criminality can constitute new equipment for living in an era of crisis.

A common thread connects the pirates of the Somali coast, the rag-tag bandits and rebels of Linebaugh's early capitalism, and the controversial artists of gangsta rap. While none of these expressions of resistance constitute movements capable of transforming social structures, they nonetheless provide insight into the efforts of marginalized subjects to transform dominant fantasies and relations that sustain exploitation and oppression. The righteous anger and utopian yearnings embedded within these sites of

resistance are precisely those that might be channeled into organized and coherent struggles. By engaging such inversions of dominant notions of ownership, labor, sexuality, and violence, critics and activists can approach a richer understanding of how meaning and social control are sites of dialectical struggle over fantasies that provide opportunities for social change. While a new world will not be ushered in by the weaponry of criminals or the records of rap artists, recognizing within such unsettling discourses a *telos* that connects an array of discourses and subjectivities provides the foundation for a radically engaged criticism and audacious emancipatory projects. Thus, as we recall the legacy of gangsta rap and look ahead to the future of the hip-hop nation, those of us invested in confronting the prison-industrial complex are left with a choice. While it is tempting to dismiss the most noxious gangsta texts as trivial fantasies of hypermasculine abandon, critics and activists would be wise to recognize within such fantasies a righteous indignation born of decades of criminalization and mass incarceration.

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[1] Hays 2008.
[2] Quinn 2005.
[3] Snider 2008.
[4] See, for example, Kennedy 2008, Tam 2008.
[5] Rose 2008, 4.
[6] See, for example, Davis 2006; Zinn 1999.
[7] See Butler 2006; Foucault 1994; 2001; Rickert 2007.
[8] See de Certeau 1988; Jameson 1981; Williams 1977.
[9] See, for example, Hartnett 1998b.
[10] See Chang 2006; Rowland 1992; Serrano 1992.
[11] See, for example, Robinson 2001.
[12] Smith 2003.
[13] Quinn 2005, 186.
[14] See Rose 2008.
[15] Brown et al. 2003; "One in 100: Behind Bars in America" 2008.
[16] Smith 2003, 90.
[17] There are numerous analyses of the current economic crisis. Among the finest, I believe, are Foster and Magdoff 2009; Moseley 2009.

[18] See, for example, Butler 2009; Simmons 2007; Starbury 2009; Tirosh 2009; Watkins 2005.
[19] Quinn 2005, 190-1.
[20] See Shawki 2006.
[21] Drake 2004.
[22] Gates 1988.
[23] Menzie 2004.
[24] On "reverse racism," see Conason 2009.
[25] See Anderson 1991; Shawki 2006.
[26] Rose 2008, 243.
[27] Ibid, 246.
[28] See Dyson 2001; Quinn 2006.
[29] Denning 1998; Denselow 1989.
[30] Sims 2007; Springer, Jr. 2007; "Thousands 'March for Justice' in Jena, Court Orders Hearing on Teen" 2007.
[31] Ciccariello-Maher 2007.
[32] This image can be found online at http://www.experienceproject.com/groups/Noticed-You-Are-A-Gangster-Im-Pretty-Gangster-Myself/126953 (accessed 29 May 2009).
[33] Watkins 2005. Also see Ogbar 2007; Rose 1994.
[34] Yousman 2003, 369.
[35] LaGrone 2000.
[36] hooks 1992; Johnson 2004.
[37] Lipsitz 1994, 151.
[38] Ibid, 138.
[39] Lott 1993, 30.
[40] However, an earlier scene shows one of the characters singing along with a gangsta rap track in his car during a traffic jam, only to lock his door at the sight of a black man on the side of the road.
[41] Kelly 2006.
[42] See Hill Collins 2005; Mercer 1997.
[43] Rose 2008.
[44] Stabile 2006.
[45] See Hart 1994; Pearson 2007; Schmid 2005.
[46] Hasian, Jr. and Flores 2000.
[47] Chesney-Lind 2004.
[48] See Gasper 1995; Perlstein 2008.
[49] For figures on female incarceration, see Frost, Greene, and Pranis 2006. On performativity, see Butler 2006. Also see Linebaugh and Rediker 2000 on witch trials as mechanisms for subordinating female subjectivity.
[50] De Coster and Heimer 2006.
[51] Also see Mauer and Chesney-Lind 2002.
[52] See Clarke 2007.

[53] Ibid, 97.
[54] Jordan-Zacherys 2007, 110.
[55] See Hill Collins 1991.
[56] Quinn 2006, 134.
[57] Ibid, 107.
[58] Quinn 2006, 135.
[59] Rose 2008.
[60] Pearson 2007, 258. Also see Enck-Wanzer 2009.
[61] Billet 2009.
[62] Negt and Kluge 1993.
[63] See, for example, Davis 2006; Marable 2000; Reeves and Campbell 1994; Selfa 2008.
[64] See, for example, Foucault 1977; Hall et al. 1978; Linebaugh 1992;1993; Meranze 1996; Sloop 1996; Stabile 2006.
[65] McCrummen and DeYoung 2009.
[66] Bliss 2009.
[67] "UPDTATE 1 – Accused Somali Pirate Pleads Not Guilty in NY Court" 2009.
[68] See, for example, Inskeep and Montagne 2009; McFadden and Shane 2009; Meyer and Sanders 2009; Norris and Siegel 2009; Perry 2009.
[69] Itzkoff 2009.
[70] Hari 2009. For an excellent history of piracy in early capitalism, see Linebaugh and Rediker 2000.
[71] K'Naan 2009.

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